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Routledge International Studies in the Philosophy of Education

EDUCATION AND FREE WILL

SPINOZA, CAUSAL DETERMINISM AND MORAL FORMATION

Johan Dahlbeck



Education and Free Will

Education and Free Will critically assesses and makes use of Spinoza's insights on human freedom to construe an account of education that is compatible with causal determinism without sacrificing the educational goal of increasing students' autonomy and self-determination. Offering a thorough investigation into the philosophical position of causal determinism, Dahlbeck discusses Spinoza's view of self-determination and presents his own suggestions for an education for autonomy from a causal determinist point of view.

The book begins by outlining the free will problem in education, before expanding on a philosophical understanding of autonomy and how it is seen as an educational ideal. It considers Spinoza's determinism and discusses his denial of moral responsibility. Later chapters consider the relationship between causal determinism and autonomy, the educational implications of understanding free will and how free will can be utilised as a valuable fiction in education.

This book will be of great interest to academics and postgraduate students in the field of education, especially those with an interest in moral education and philosophy of education. It will also be of interest to those in the fields of philosophy and psychology and specifically those focusing on the free will problem, on Spinoza studies, and on the relation between moral psychology and external influence.

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Spinoza, Causal Determinism and
Moral Formation

Johan Dahlbeck

First published 2019
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Dahlbeck, Johan, author.

Title: Education and free will : Spinoza, causal determinism, and
moral formation / Johan Dahlbeck.

Description: Abingdon, Oxon ; New York, NY : Routledge, 2019. |

Series: Routledge international studies in the philosophy of
education | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018025634 (print) | LCCN 2018032940

(ebook) | ISBN 9780429486227 (E-book) | ISBN

9781138598652 (hbk) | ISBN 9780429486227 (ebk)

Subjects: LCSH: Moral education—Philosophy. | Free will and
determinism. | Spinoza, Benedictus de, 1632–1677.

Classification: LCC LC268 (ebook) | LCC LC268 .D27 2019 (print) |
DDC 370.11/4—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018025634>

ISBN: 978-1-138-59865-2 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-429-48622-7 (ebk)

Typeset in Galliard
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
Introduction	1
<i>Education, freedom of will and the problem of charitability</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Why Spinoza, why now?</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Chapter summaries</i>	<i>4</i>
1 Outlining the free will problem: determinism vs indeterminism and beyond	9
<i>Am I an unmoved mover?</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Introducing the free will problem</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>The standard positions: a brief summary</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>The problem with standard positions</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Beyond the standard positions: Spinoza's counterintuitive conception of necessitated freedom</i>	<i>18</i>
2 Education and autonomy	27
<i>Freedom and education</i>	<i>27</i>
<i>Freedom and autonomy: am I the author of my actions?</i>	<i>28</i>
<i>Autonomy through education</i>	<i>30</i>
<i>Autonomy, manipulation and critical thinking</i>	<i>32</i>
<i>Autonomy, decision-making and moral responsibility</i>	<i>33</i>
<i>Autonomy, self-determination and self-understanding</i>	<i>36</i>
<i>Departing from the ordinary conception of autonomy</i>	<i>41</i>
3 Spinoza on self-determination and the improvement of the understanding	45
<i>Spinoza's causal determinism</i>	<i>45</i>
<i>Spinoza on the ethical striving for knowledge</i>	<i>48</i>
<i>Causal determinism and the false belief in freedom of the will</i>	<i>50</i>

Spinoza on praise and blame 54

Gradual freedom from external causes: an educational ideal 56

4 Moral education and moral responsibility 62

Education and moral formation 62

Aims of character education: the cultivation of virtue 63

Challenges of contemporary character education: the free will problem and the question of moral responsibility 65

A Spinozistic approach to character education and virtues: understanding and accepting natural causation 73

Spinoza on the status of moral knowledge 75

On self-preservation beyond mere survival and the relative complexity of bodies 77

A model of moral education or a moral model of education? 78

5 Can causal determinism and autonomy coexist? 85

Causal determinism and moral responsibility 85

Autonomy without free will 89

Free will as a valuable fiction 92

Valuable fictions and autonomy 94

Education and the use of valuable fictions 98

6 Free will as a valuable fiction in education 102

From false belief to valuable fiction 102

Fictions and illusions 104

Reason and the emotions 107

Two illustrative examples 111

The complexity of natural causation and the educational dream of unpredictability 113

7 Education for autonomy without free will 120

Summing up the main arguments of the book 120

Understanding natural causation: an educational path to autonomy without free will 122

Between facts and fictions: the dual purpose of education 125

Two parallel notions of education 127

Bibliography 131

Index 138

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Aiyana Curtis, my editor at Routledge, for her support and help along the way. I am also grateful to Will Bateman for his efficiency and competence as editorial assistant throughout the process of publication. I would also like to acknowledge the input and help offered by the two anonymous referees commissioned by Routledge. I am indebted to two people in particular. Moa De Lucia Dahlbeck, my sister and colleague, has read drafts continuously, made invaluable suggestions and has helped me sharpen my arguments and has pushed me to explain things more thoroughly than I initially believed necessary. Peter Lilja, my colleague and friend, has read drafts in various stages and contributed through continuous discussions about the aims and limits of education and educational theory. I hope to be able to repay you both for this great service.

Parts of Chapter 1, Chapter 2, Chapter 3, Chapter 5 and Chapter 7 are reprinted by permission of John Wiley and Sons from Dahlbeck, J. 'Education and the free will problem: a Spinozist contribution,' *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 2017, 51(4): 725–743. Parts of Chapter 1 and Chapter 4 are reprinted by permission of Springer Nature from Dahlbeck, J. 'A Spinozistic model of moral education,' *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 2017, 36(5): 533–550. Parts of Chapter 1 and Chapter 4 are reprinted by permission of Springer Nature from Dahlbeck, J. 'Becoming virtuous: character education and the problem of free will,' in P. Smeyers (ed.) *International Handbook of Philosophy of Education*, Dordrecht: Springer, 2018, pp. 921–936.



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Introduction

Education, freedom of will and the problem of charitability

What is it to become a moral person and how can moral formation be facilitated by education? There is a deep sense in which these two related questions pose fundamental challenges to the philosophy of education. On the one hand, they are questions that philosophers interested in education have grappled with for a long time. On the other hand, they are not, and likely will never be, settled in any definitive sense. They are what we might categorise as *eternal questions* of the philosophy of education. As such, they resist resolution by virtue of their intimate connection with difficult metaphysical problems, and they take on slightly new forms relative to the changes of society, which further complicates the notion that they might be solved once and for all. At the same time, they are important to grapple with insofar as they offer an interesting opportunity for revisiting and discussing the aims of education and for investigating the very substance of what we take education to be all about. Even if we grant that this investigation will not lead to any definitive answers, it may be that the investigation, in and of itself, opens up unexpected avenues of thought that, in turn, allow us to pose new questions and push the boundaries of what we take to be the central claims of philosophy of education.

There is another related motive for investigating questions of this character. To the extent that our ways of (however provisionally) answering these questions reflect what we take education to be and to be capable of, they underpin ordinary talk of and generally held ideas about education. Even if philosophy is often perceived as being far removed from ordinary conversation, it is important to note that all conversations rely, in one way or another, on philosophical claims and metaphysical assumptions.¹ One of the purposes of doing philosophy of education, from my point of view, is therefore to make these tacit claims and assumptions about education visible and to, when necessary, question them in a rigorous and systematic sense.² This way, we might illustrate 1) how ordinary talk is not as innocent as it is often made out to be, and 2) how practice benefits from being grounded in something more than ordinary talk because ordinary talk tends to be both opaque and open to several parallel avenues of interpretation.

2 Introduction

One of the most important tasks of a philosopher of education, in my view, is therefore to direct the investigative gaze towards the more problematic aspects of ordinary talk and to investigate the currency of some of our most common assumptions about education. I propose that the assumed capacity of free will represents one such assumption that is both pervasive (in that it is deeply embedded in our ordinary talk about education) and, when scrutinised, deeply problematic. As I aim to show over the course of this book, the assumed capacity of free will makes for a central part of our basic assumptions about what it is to become a moral person and, in extension, how moral formation can be facilitated by education. By scrutinising the conceptions of the will that underpin and inform our ordinary understanding of what it is to be a moral person, I aim to illustrate how education might benefit from a more examined understanding, being well aware that such an understanding may also threaten some of our most pervasive and taken-for-granted assumptions about the means and ends of education.

In undertaking this investigation I will endeavour to avoid the pitfalls of *charitability*. Because the free will problem is a well-known historical problem, an investigation into the consequences of our ordinary conception of free will for education involves an investigation in the history of philosophy. Historical ideas may be approached in different ways and so it is called for to say something about how I approach historical ideas and why I approach them the way I do. The problem of charitability is especially relevant to address in the context of the history of ideas. Historian of philosophy Yitzhak Melamed summarises the logic of charitable interpretations as follows:

Suppose a Past Philosopher (PP) makes a statement S. We believe that S, read literally, is clearly unacceptable. Since we appreciate PP as a great mind, we cannot believe that he or she could have uttered such foolishness. Thus, instead of ascribing S to PP, we ascribe S', which is different from, and sometimes even utterly opposed to S.

(Melamed, 2013, p. 260)

We might, then, appeal to charitability when turning to a past philosopher in order to substantiate an issue that is considered especially politically important or timely. While this may require that we bracket aspects that will not fit into our contemporary perspective, this might be deemed a small price to pay for the benefit of the philosopher's other valuable insights. In this way, Plato's views on education might be considered relevant for contemporary educational theory in a democratic context while his position on slavery clearly is not. Similarly, Rousseau's insights into the education of Émile still stimulates much educational debate concerning the critique of schooling while his views on the education of Sophie is generally either passed over or treated in terms of an unfortunate effect of historically outdated views on gender. While it may be that these examples will not prove philosophically fruitful to engage with, it may also be the case that engaging with them forces us to reconsider some of our own taken-for-granted assumptions. The point is that in moderating or bracketing problematic accounts

of historical philosophers, we risk reinforcing our own preconceptions while shying away from difficult issues that might trouble the worldview we prefer.

Inasmuch as free will is foundational for contemporary theories of education (and in extension for the ordinary talk of education), I propose that it qualifies as a notion that many would rather leave undisturbed, because disturbing it might jeopardise other values central to our beliefs about the importance of personal autonomy and the efficacy of decision-making. This position is understandable but it is also potentially dangerous insofar as it starts out from an unwillingness to scrutinise one's preconceptions. The danger lies in the fact that clinging to our beliefs and avoiding to subject them to critical inquiry may cause us to settle for an overly fragmented understanding of the world, and fragmentation breeds prejudices and superstition³ (regardless of how noble our intentions may be).

Why Spinoza, why now?

Confronting our preconceptions about the role of free will in education, I will turn to the early modern Dutch philosopher Benedict de Spinoza (1632–1677) for guidance. I do this for two main reasons. The first reason is that Spinoza dedicated his philosophical life to examining and troubling our most common preconceptions; preconceptions that he claimed were responsible for furthering our most deeply rooted prejudices and superstitions (see Elapp⁴). He did this because he believed this endeavour to be our only viable path to freedom. The second reason is that Spinoza, himself, has been subject to his fair share of charitable interpretations, resulting in what Melamed suggests is a severe domestication of his philosophy. Because this domestication flies in the face of Spinoza's entire philosophical project (and not just a few untimely remarks) it makes it especially relevant to take extra care not to give in to the temptation of adjusting his radical philosophy to contemporary sentiments in order to make it fit better with popular opinion. From my perspective, this is the only way to break the grasp of popular opinion and to distance ourselves from it, if only momentarily, in order to find out if it is justified.

While Spinoza is still relatively uncharted territory in the philosophy of education, there has been a surge of interest in recent years.⁵ Curiously, little attention has been paid to the far-reaching consequences for education of Spinoza's naturalism.⁶ Instead, focus is typically placed on Spinoza's potential for substantiating various contemporary ideas that may range from the perceived importance of raising environmental awareness in education to the need for a radical democratisation of educational relations and the collective emancipation of marginalised groups through education. I am not claiming that there is anything wrong with this, but I am claiming that this is not where Spinoza can be most helpful to us. In order to elucidate the sense in which I take Spinoza to offer us the most, it is useful to turn to his own reflections on the nature of his work.

In the introduction to his unfinished *Political Treatise*, Spinoza comments on the unfortunate effects of the failure of philosophers to distinguish between an idealised yet confused image of human nature and an adequate understanding

4 *Introduction*

of human nature. This, he asserts, is the root of many prejudices, including the common misconception that humans act as first causes with regard to their assumed capacity of free will:

Philosophers conceive the affects by which we're torn as vices, which men fall into by their own fault. That's why they usually laugh at them, weep over them, censure them, or (if they want to seem particularly holy) curse them. They believe they perform a godly act and reach the pinnacle of wisdom when they've learned how to praise in many ways a human nature which doesn't exist anywhere, and how to bewail the way men really are. They conceive men not as they are, but as they want them to be.

(*TP* I, 1/p. 503)⁷

To remedy this misconception on the part of philosophers, Spinoza explains that he

took great pains not to laugh at human actions, or mourn them, or curse them, but only to understand them. So I've contemplated human affects – like love, hate, anger, envy, love of esteem, compassion, and the other emotions – not as vices of human nature, but as properties which pertain to it in the same way heat, cold, storms, thunder, etc., pertain to the nature of the air. Though these things are inconvenient, they're still necessary, and have definite causes, through which we strive to understand their nature. The Mind rejoices in contemplating them truly just as much as it does in knowing things pleasing to the senses.

(*TP* I, 4/p. 505)

This declaration of intent motivates Spinoza's entire philosophical undertaking, providing a rationale for his quest for a kind of human freedom that is sensitive to the realities of human nature. In order to avoid the pitfalls of superstition and wishful thinking, Spinoza needs to stake out a path that speaks to the human desire for moral standards without sacrificing his commitment to naturalism. I contend that it is Spinoza's refusal to adjust his philosophical investigation to the demands of popular opinion that makes him stand out as one of the most interesting and bold thinkers in the history of philosophy. In order to draw from this, however, we need to take special care not to domesticate Spinoza's philosophy, lest we turn it into precisely the sort of wishful thinking that he himself rejects. This means that for Spinoza to become an asset in the re-imagination of central assumptions of the philosophy of education, a starting point should be that education ought to be theorised not on the basis of how we would want humans to be, but on the basis of what they are. Whether or not this will succeed remains to be seen.

Chapter summaries

In Chapter 1, we will begin by outlining the free will problem in philosophy. This entails explaining its fundamental features and mapping out the dominant

positions philosophers have assumed in relation to it. Clearly, this is not meant to be a comprehensive guide to the problem of free will,⁸ but rather a kind of basic road map necessary for our further investigation into the terrain of free will and education. The chapter closes by shifting focus from a more general overview of the free will problem to Spinoza's counterintuitive understanding of freedom as necessitated and by positioning this conception of freedom within the framework of his explanatory rationalism, which is couched in his naturalism and his causal determinism.

The focus of Chapter 2 is on autonomy and education. Autonomy, it is argued, is a concept that ties the assumptions of free will closely to education insofar as autonomy is often discussed in terms of a possible aim of education. The chapter begins by fleshing out the philosophical understanding of autonomy. It then turns to autonomy as an educational ideal, looking at some of the ways this ideal has been debated. It then looks at different aspects of autonomy in education and how the assumed capacity of free will figures in the background of many educational accounts of autonomy. This is done in order to substantiate the connection made between autonomy as an educational ideal and free will. The chapter closes by considering Spinoza's understanding of autonomy in terms of an increased self-understanding, opening up a possible way for conceiving of autonomy in education without assuming a capacity of free will.

Chapter 3 takes a step back, investigating the foundations of Spinoza's determinism, his understanding of the will and the connection he makes between understanding natural causation adequately and the ethical striving for freedom. It then looks at what appears to be a tension in Spinoza's philosophy insofar as he claims that all ideas are adequate in God and, simultaneously, that humans have innate, yet false beliefs (such as the belief in free will). Following Tóth (2016), I suggest that this seeming tension may be resolved if we take into account that while all ideas are adequate in relation to the objects they actually represent, the connection between an idea and an object may be confused, resulting in false beliefs insofar as we believe an idea to represent an object that it does not and cannot adequately represent. False beliefs, then, result from a more general privation of knowledge, not ideas that are inadequate in themselves. The chapter ends by discussing Spinoza's denial of moral responsibility and by considering Spinoza's ethical ideal of gradual freedom from external causes in terms of a productive educational ideal.

Because free will and moral responsibility are typically taken to be coextensive, Chapter 4 is dedicated to an investigation of the role of the will in moral education. More specifically, it investigates different variations of free will in character education, being an influential form of moral education dating back to antiquity. The chapter concludes that personal decision-making is typically conceived as a central part of contemporary character education. Against this, I argue that Spinoza offers a form of moral education that stays faithful to core parts of Aristotelian character education while avoiding some of the pitfalls of a pre-modern worldview. More importantly, it does this without resorting to an explanation that requires a capacity of free will, making it into a thoroughly naturalistic model of moral education. Because it lacks features that are commonly taken to be

6 *Introduction*

required by moral education, however, it is argued that what Spinoza's philosophy offers is a starting point for a moral model of education rather than a model of moral education *per se*.

In Chapter 5, we take a closer look at the relation between causal determinism and autonomy. This will help clarify what education – insofar as education is conceived as aiming for the development of autonomy – can actually accomplish in a deterministic universe. Having looked at this in a more general sense, we will narrow in on Spinoza's epistemological account so as to find out what it may offer education in terms of a framework for the development of a naturalistically conceived autonomy. It is suggested that while the folk psychology of free will is best understood in terms of a false belief, the notion of free will can also be utilised as a valuable fiction (without betraying the commitment to causal determinism). As such, it might function by strengthening the self-preservation of those educated without assuming that it adequately represents the true nature of human agency. The chapter closes by addressing the question of how the use of valuable fictions in education can be reconciled with the overarching educational aim of improving our understanding of natural causation.

The focus of Chapter 6 is on investigating the educational implications of understanding free will in terms of a valuable fiction. The challenge here is to suggest concrete ways of harvesting the benefits of using free will as a valuable fiction without compromising the commitment to theorise education on the basis of what humans are and not what we want them to be. This involves breaking with the folk psychology of free will and endeavouring to turn the false belief in human exceptionalism into a valuable fiction, useful for us in our striving for self-preservation. In order to do this, however, I must first distinguish the notion of fictions from that of illusions – being a competing conceptualisation of the false belief in free will – so as to illustrate the benefits of naturalising the human will in an educational context. Having done so we will look at a couple of illustrative examples of how free will can be utilised as a valuable fiction in education. The chapter closes with a few remarks on how we might navigate between an understanding of education founded on the overestimation of human cognitive capacities on the one hand, and an overly romantic notion of education as a thoroughly open-ended and unpredictable process of change on the other.

Chapter 7 summarises the main arguments of the book. In conclusion, it suggests a conception of education for autonomy grounded in a naturalistic understanding of the will. In order to moderate the pervasiveness of the folk psychology of free will it is suggested that using free will as a valuable fiction in education makes it possible to balance between an external standpoint grounded in the metaphysics of causal determinism and an experiential understanding of the human ability to do otherwise that allows for our ordinary conception of autonomy. This leads us to the counterintuitive conclusion that education is guided by two parallel, yet seemingly incommensurable, aims. On the one hand, education aims at moderating dangerous affects like jealousy and anger by reproducing social norms and moral standards that depend on the idea of free will acting as a temporary placeholder for a natural privation of knowledge. On the other hand, education

aims at promoting the improvement of understanding, where the idea of free will may be employed as a valuable fiction, useful for stimulating the imagination of those striving for a better understanding of themselves and the world. In light of this, it is argued that we are in fact dealing with two different notions of education: 1) a notion of education primarily aiming at upholding a functioning moral community, and 2) a notion of education primarily aiming at promoting human autonomy. While these two notions appear to be contradictory, it is argued that the former is to be understood as a prerequisite for the latter and that both are necessary for a more full conception of education.

Notes

- 1 In an educational context, there is a clear parallel here to how theoretical suppositions can become absorbed in (and distorted by) ‘commonsense’ belief through the daily work of teachers. Christopher Winch notes this tendency: ‘One way in which theory comes to play a role in the work of teachers is via the sedimentation of theoretical ideas into everyday practice and judgement through the popularisation and simplification of ideas that have a theoretical or scientific provenance’ (2017, p. 64).
- 2 Again, this may be compared with Winch’s argument concerning the tacit theoretical claims of teachers. On Winch’s account, lacking a sufficient understanding of how these tacit claims are philosophically grounded is potentially problematic. ‘Since the believer in such claims will quite likely be unaware of their provenance and how they have been transformed in transmission, there is a strong danger that they will not be able to mount a critique of them, since they do not have available the systematic basis of what has been offered to them’ (2017, p. 103).
- 3 This is so because fragmentation entails a privation of knowledge. The relation Spinoza sets up between privation of knowledge and the perpetuation of false beliefs will be dealt with in some detail in Chapter 3.
- 4 Passages in Spinoza’s *Ethics* will be referred to using the following abbreviations: a(-xiom), c(-orollary), d(-emonstration), D(-efinition), p(-roposition), s(-cholium) and pref(-ace). DOA refers to D(-efinition) O(-f) the A(-ffects). Hence, E4p22c refers to the corollary of the 22nd proposition of part 4. All references to the *Ethics* are to Curley’s (Spinoza, 1985) translation.
- 5 A recent example is the publication of a special issue in the journal *Educational Philosophy and Theory* dedicated to the theme of Spinoza and education. The special issue is titled *Thinking with Spinoza about Education* (de Freitas, Sellar & Jensen, 2018).
- 6 I willingly submit that I have been guilty of this myself in my early attempts to theorise educational relations with the help of Spinoza.
- 7 References to Spinoza’s *Political Treatise* (TP) are to Curley’s (Spinoza, 2016) translation.
- 8 For useful guides to the major debates in the philosophy of free will, interested readers are referred to Robert Kane’s *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* (2011) and Gary Watson’s *Free Will* (2013a).

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1 Outlining the free will problem

Determinism vs indeterminism and beyond

Am I an unmoved mover?

To will something into existence is to create something out of nothing. It is to be an unmoved mover. In philosophy this is called *causa sui*. Self-causation: to intervene in the world of natural causation and to bring about something that was not there before, and that was not caused by something else that was there before either. To decide, to will, to make a spontaneous change.¹ To stake out a new direction for oneself and to abandon the old path in favour of the new. This image is both intimately familiar and intuitively comforting. But is it true? Do I have the power to make something out of nothing? Can I really abandon the old in favour of the new by virtue of my willpower alone? Are choices real or are they simply psychological Band-Aids naturally designed to sooth the anxieties of living in a deterministic universe?

This, in a nutshell, is what the free will problem is all about. It is, as many reputable philosophers have come to conclude, in all probability an unsolvable metaphysical problem.² Nevertheless, the assumption that we have got, alternatively have not got, the capacity of free will informs our most basic understanding of our relation to each other and the natural world as well as our understanding of the limits of human agency and the promise of our major social institutions. After all, freedom is a central concept for describing and making sense of the human condition, and for demarcating the human being from the rest of nature.³ Just because something escapes the grasp of reason doesn't mean that it will not continue to shape the way we live.

Rather than attempting to answer the question of whether free will (understood in the ordinary strong sense) is real or not, this book will set out to investigate the consequences of some of our most common assumptions about free will for education. More specifically, it will probe the tension between the standard conception of education as some form of intentional striving for human freedom and the lack of evidence for freedom from constraint in the natural world. It asks the question 'What does it mean for education to assume that children and students are, or can become, unmoved movers in a world otherwise characterised by the immutable regularities of natural causation?'⁴ And, in extension, 'How can a worldview conditioned by the assumption that natural causation constrains

human action be convincingly reconciled with a productive understanding of human autonomy?’

Introducing the free will problem

The concept of free will is comprised of two distinct but interrelated philosophical concepts. The first is freedom, which, as we will come to see, can be understood in different ways. The second is the will, which is traditionally understood in terms of either a faculty of willing – i.e. a special faculty of the mind commonly reserved for human beings – or as an integrated part of the intellectual capacity that we make use of when we think (and that might, then, be available to other sentient beings besides humans). Over the course of this book we will familiarise ourselves with different notions of freedom and different understandings of the will such as they appear in relation to different approaches to the free will problem.

It is likely that the problem of free will owes much of its persistence in philosophical debate to its key role in relation to the question of moral responsibility. As Peter van Inwagen has noted: ‘We care about free will because we care about moral responsibility, and we are persuaded that we cannot make ascriptions of moral responsibility to agents who lack free will’ (2017, p. 20). In other words, because we feel the need to ascribe moral responsibility, we also feel the need to posit the capacity of freedom of will.⁵ This need for something to ground moral responsibility in thereby motivates the thankless task of endeavouring to solve the free will problem. The most practical way of approaching the free will problem would seem to be by way of the standard positions of determinism and indeterminism and, in extension, of compatibilism and incompatibilism. This way, we can evaluate the different positions on their own merits without assuming that they derive from, or need to adhere to, the same metaphysical framework. Let’s begin by doing that.

The standard positions: a brief summary

Historically, the free will problem connects deeply with the metaphysics of human nature. When Aristotle proposed that ‘the stick moves the stone and is moved by the hand, which again is moved by the man’ (Aristotle, 1984, p. 427 / *Physics*, 256a), he made a clear distinction between the first two causal events and the third. While it seems straightforward enough to assume that the hand is an integral part of the man, the distinction made in the quote seems to imply that the hand lacks something essential that the man naturally possesses. The hand is like the stick in that it needs the push from something external to actually *do* something. On this interpretation, a human being is therefore something more than the sum of his or her parts.⁶ This human exceptionalism is commonly attributed to the unique capacity of agency, which, in turn, is typically taken to be a precondition for moral responsibility. In Roderick Chisholm’s words:

If we are responsible, and if what I have been trying to say is true, then we have a prerogative which some would attribute only to God: each of us,

when we act, is a prime mover unmoved. In doing what we do, we cause certain events to happen, and nothing – or no one – causes us to cause those events to happen.

(2013, p. 34)

While events caused by sticks and hands are in principle predictable (by virtue of being natural events caused by other natural events), events caused by human agents are not. Put differently, causal events involving physical and non-sentient objects like hands and sticks may be explained by appealing to the law-like regularities of nature whereas human agency introduces something with the ability to act contrary to these otherwise universal regularities.⁷ It makes man – in Aristotelian terms – into a *first mover* whose agency may instigate causal chains in a manner that nothing else can. The previous quote from Chisholm thereby introduces us to one of two standard positions with regards to the free will problem. This position is known as *indeterminism* and it states that the future may unfold in one of several as of yet undetermined ways. From the point of view of Chisholm's brand of human exceptionalism, the way in which the future unfolds depends (at least in part) upon the choices and actions of the first mover. Hence, 'if a man is responsible for a certain event or a certain state of affairs [. . .], then that event or state of affairs was brought about by some act of his, and the act was something that was in his power either to perform or not to perform' (Chisholm, 2013, p. 27). The reason for this unique ability to either act or to abstain from action is that a man is not a stick but a moral agent capable of moving something without first being moved by something else. This unique ability is typically attributed to the faculty of the will. Understanding the will in terms of a separate and uniquely human faculty is a standard starting point for the indeterminist position.

On the opposite end of the spectrum is a position known as *determinism*. Much like indeterminism, determinism can be traced back to antiquity.⁸ Notable philosophers defending variations of a determinist position include Spinoza, Priestley, C. D. Broad, B. F. Skinner and, more recently, Ted Honderich, Derk Pereboom, Galen Strawson and Bruce Waller. Unlike indeterminism, determinism holds that all events are brought about by, and may be explained through, antecedent causes. This means that for the determinist there is no substantial or metaphysical difference between the causal power of humans and the causal power of sticks and hands. It also means that the human will is not generally understood in terms of a unique faculty but in terms of an integrated aspect of the intellect. The laws of nature together with antecedent causes determine the outcome of all events and nothing is exempt from this natural order. This goes for everything, including human actions and behaviours.⁹ Determinism therefore entails that given all things as they are, and given that all things are equally constrained by universal laws of nature, there is only one possible future. It follows from this that determinism typically precludes moral responsibility (at least insofar as moral responsibility is believed to be predicated by the ability to do otherwise). It would be too hasty to conclude from this that freedom of will is preconditioned by indeterminism however. While it is certainly challenged by it,

there have been many attempts to reconcile freedom of will with determinism. Such attempts typically appeal to some form of *compatibilism*.

In short, compatibilist accounts argue that freedom of will is compatible with a deterministic understanding of the world. The compatibilist challenge, therefore, is to explain how and under what specific circumstances the law-like regularities of nature can be circumscribed by human agency (see Lewis, 2013). There is no shortage of compatibilist defences of free will in the history of philosophy. Philosophers like Hobbes, Locke, Hume and Moore have all attempted to defend versions of free will without denying determinism. Hobbes writes in his *Leviathan* that man's freedom consists in this: 'that he finds no stop in doing what he has the will, desire, or inclination to do' (1994, p. 136/*Leviathan*, 2.21). While the will is often constrained by external forces, much like anything else in this world, Hobbes labels it free when it can act unimpeded. Free will is thereby compatible with determinism in the sense that it is only free when it is unconstrained (as opposed to compelled) by external forces. Hume follows Hobbes' conditioned understanding of freedom of the will, arguing that for the will to be free does not mean that it constitutes an intervention into the laws of nature. It simply means that one's inclinations and desires coincide with what is possible to do in a given situation. As seen from the outside however, it is clear that what one wants and wills is always conditioned by causes external to oneself. Hume gives an example:

We may imagine we feel a liberty within ourselves; but as a spectator can commonly infer our actions from our motives and character; and even where he cannot, he concludes in general, that he might, where he perfectly acquainted with every circumstance of our situation and temper, and the moist secret springs of our complexion and disposition.

(Hume, 2000, pp. 262–263/*Treatise*, 2.3.2)

While clearly conditioned by causal events beyond one's control, the freedom to act otherwise is still at the heart of Hume's conception of liberty. In his *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* Hume asserts that, '[b]y liberty, then, we can only mean *a power of acting or not acting, according to the determinations of the will*; that is, if we choose to remain at rest, we may; if we choose to move, we also may' (1993, p. 63/*Enquiry*, 8.1, emphasis in original). As Honderich puts it, for the compatibilist '[f]reedom is voluntariness – quite other than origination' (2005, p. 130), and so the compatibilist's understanding of freedom of will is generally weaker than for someone supposing freedom to entail the power to originate and the power to intervene with natural causation.¹⁰ Still, compatibilism does assume that the will is free if unconstrained and that the law-like regularities of nature cannot threaten it insofar as they are aligned with one another. Typically, this means that I act freely in the sense that I act willingly, but that my will, in turn, is always causally determined by factors beyond my control.¹¹

Harry Frankfurt (2013b) has formulated a more recent influential account of compatibilism arguing that moral responsibility does *not* in fact require alternative possibilities. Frankfurt's account proceeds from the observation that, generally

speaking, moral responsibility and coercion are held to be mutually exclusive. If someone is forced into performing a specific action, he or she is not typically held morally responsible for having performed it. This, Frankfurt argues, is not a sustainable conclusion. Frankfurt's argumentation hinges on the assumption that the doctrine of the mutual exclusion of coercion and moral responsibility makes for a particularised version of the principle of alternate possibilities. Illustrating with an example, Frankfurt concludes that even under threat it is still possible for the coerced agent 'to defy the threat if he wishes to do so and to accept the penalty his action would bring down upon him' (p. 172), thereby weakening the assumed link between the particularised version and the principle of alternate possibilities. Frankfurt grants that while there may be conditions making it impossible for a person to act in more than one way, this does not play any role in explaining *why* he or she does it. This leads him to the following question: 'Why should the fact [that he could not do otherwise] be considered in reaching a moral judgment concerning the person when it does not help in any way to understand either what made him act as he did or what, in other circumstances, he might have done?' (p. 174).¹²

Others have been less inclined to follow and subscribe to the compatibilist argumentation. *Incompatibilism* is the position stating that free will and determinism are incompatible and that either determinism is true and free will is false, *or* determinism is false and free will is true. Van Inwagen's argument for incompatibilism (also known as the Consequence Argument) illustrates the stakes involved in the conflict between compatibilists and incompatibilists:

If determinism is true, then our acts are the consequences of the laws of nature and events in the remote past. But it is not up to us what went on before we were born, and neither is it up to us what the laws of nature are. Therefore, the consequences of these things (including our present acts) are not up to us.

(Van Inwagen, 1983, p. 16)

As indicated previously, two possible conclusions follow from van Inwagen's argument. Either determinism is taken to be true, in which case the consequences of our actions are not ultimately up to us as we have no influence over events in the remote past. The other conclusion, supported by van Inwagen, would be that determinism is false and that human agency introduces a special capacity independent of prior events and unconstrained by the law-like regularities of nature. The force of this so-called libertarian understanding of the will is typically – as indicated earlier – bound up with our everyday understanding of morality and our moral language. It would make little sense to praise or blame someone if we could not be reasonably sure that they were in fact morally responsible for their actions. This in combination with the introspective experience that we actually do have a choice most of the time makes a libertarian understanding of the will intuitively attractive to many.¹³ The challenge facing libertarians is to explain what may be called 'contra-causal freedom' where an event is neither taken to have

happened ‘as a result of unbroken causal continuity’ nor ‘by pure chance’ (Smart, 2013, p. 63). It has proven difficult to explain how something can be undetermined by external causes without giving in to pure chance, and this is important because pure chance is as much of a threat to moral responsibility as causal determinism is. It would not seem very reasonable to hold someone responsible for something that we attribute to pure chance.¹⁴

Notable historical philosophers claimed to have followed a (broadly conceived) libertarian tradition include Augustine, Kant, C. S. Peirce and William James to name a few. Augustine is commonly identified as one of the first philosophers to argue for a version of libertarian free will (see Augustine, 2010).¹⁵ Augustine’s account of free will emanates from his discussion on the existence of evil in the world. He claims that men are rightfully held responsible for evil acts because evil acts result from someone being guided by blind passions and desires for temporal things rather than reason. We always seek the good, but, being blinded by our desires, we typically fail to resist seeking temporary pleasures, something that requires a will guided by reason. Under the guidance of reason, our will and free choice will prevail over our tendency to give in to temporary temptations. For Augustine, then, we act with free will when our understanding of the good is guided by reason. Following Plato, Augustine’s account of free will thereby hinges on the distinction between the ‘animal’ and ‘rational’ part of human nature (O’Connor, 2010). His notion of free will effectively enables him to causally relate all vices to the human agent (Kent, 1995). While Augustine defends the libertarian position that ‘an agent acts with free will, or is morally responsible for an act, only if the act is not causally determined by anything outside the agent’ (Stump, 2001, p. 125), he departs from the standard position in that he does not claim that acting with free will entails being able to do otherwise.

Kant stands out as another important figure in the historical free will debate largely due to his overall stature and importance as a philosopher, paving the way for modernity and modern political liberalism.¹⁶ Arguably, Kant was instrumental for translating and remodelling a theistic medieval version of free will in a modern context where free will and moral responsibility could be rescued from the threats of causal determinism by being divorced from the empirical or phenomenal world of appearances. Kant postulates the existence of a *noumenal* realm where the deterministic laws of nature hold no sway. It is in this noumenal realm that the Kantian will is considered transcendentally free, meaning that it acts as a first cause unaffected by the causal events of the phenomenal world.¹⁷ Accordingly, Kant famously ‘inferred that humans are to be treated as “ends in themselves” because they are the originators of *their own ends* or purposes’ (Kane, 1998, p. 4, emphasis in original). In the phenomenal world, or the world of appearances, events unfold according to the deterministic laws of nature which precludes freedom of action. Kant therefore rejects a compatibilist version of freedom arguing that ‘it would at bottom be nothing better than the freedom of a turnspit, which, when once it is wound up, also accomplishes its movements of itself’ (Kant, 1996, p. 218/*KpV* 5.97). For Kant, the transcendental freedom necessary for

moral responsibility amounts to ‘the faculty of beginning a state from itself,’ and as such it ‘is a pure transcendental idea, which, first, contains nothing borrowed from experience, and second, the object of which also cannot be given determinately in any experience’ (Kant, 1998, p. 533/ *KrV* A533/B561).

In a contemporary context, libertarianism typically presupposes the capacity to do otherwise. It is this capacity that enables human rational agents to be held morally responsible unless prevented by external forces beyond their control. To be free, in this sense, thereby requires that ‘[i]t must at least sometimes be genuinely up to him [the free agent] what he chooses or decides to do’ (Wiggins, 2013, p. 95). That is, a choice of an agent must neither be determined by prior causes nor totally random, but the result of something we might call volition. Unless volitions are construed as something above or beyond natural phenomena, however, they need to be explicable in the same terms as we would explain other things in nature. David Wiggins thereby proposes the following approach for the rational libertarian:

We need not trace free actions back to volitions construed as little pushes aimed from outside the physical world. What we must find instead are patterns that are coherent and intelligent in the low level terms of practical deliberation, even if they are not amenable to the kind of generalisation or necessity that is the stuff of rigorous theory.

(Wiggins, 2013, p. 114)

Volitions, then, should be understood not as inexplicable exceptions to universal laws of nature, but as difficult-to-pin-down natural patterns that may explain free choices without making them seem less free. This obviously requires something beyond ordinary theories of causation, as these appear to be inadequate when it comes to negotiating the space between causal determinism and randomness. It furthermore needs to explain how this uniquely human ability fits in with a worldview that does not rely on a seemingly arbitrary bifurcation between rational agents and nature. Wiggins continues:

On this conception the agent is conceived as an essentially and straightforwardly enmattered or embodied thing. His possible peculiarity as a natural thing among things in nature is simply that his biography unfolds not only non-deterministically but also intelligibly; non-deterministically in that personality and character are never something complete and need not be the deterministic origin of action; intelligibly in that each new action or episode constitutes a comprehensible phase in the unfolding of character, a further specification of what the man has now *become*.

(Wiggins, 2013, p. 114, emphasis in original)

There is, in Wiggins’ account, a sharp critique of the idea that our concept of natural laws or law-like regularities could ever sufficiently describe or predict human decision-making. Therefore, the capacity to do otherwise would not be

a violation of these laws, since they are not held to be applicable to the moral domain to begin with.

At this point we can grasp more fully what is at stake in the debate between determinists and indeterminists, and between compatibilists and incompatibilists. What is at stake is the reality of moral responsibility. Moral responsibility is central for negotiating human relations and for motivating the different institutions aimed at safeguarding and regulating the human social world. The question of moral responsibility is complicated because it is tied up with contested metaphysical notions such as human freedom, agency, volition, causal relations and the laws of nature. As we have just seen, depending on the position we take, these concepts will take on different meaning and so the different understandings of, and attitudes to, moral responsibility will vary according to the metaphysical framework set up as a starting point for the debate.

The problem with standard positions

While drawing up a scheme of standard positions may be very helpful in terms of providing a manageable overview of a contested philosophical problem it is also potentially dangerous. It is dangerous insofar as it simplifies and adjusts different arguments and accounts so as to make them fit in better with the overall scheme. It is quite clear that while a medieval thinker like Augustine and a contemporary philosopher like van Inwagen may both be argued to present libertarian accounts of free will, there are enough conceptual differences between them to warrant caution against grouping them together under the same banner. The main problem seems to be that standard positions tend to take on a life of their own and that, rather than simply serving as useful tools for alleviating the handling of complex issues, they become self-serving in that we start looking for ways of adjusting complex arguments so that they fit better with our preconception of what, let's say, a compatibilist account, or an incompatibilist account, is supposed to look like. In this sense, standard positions may even stand in our way, obscuring interesting nuances of discussions by prompting us to look for straightforward ways of identifying what *kinds* of accounts we are dealing with. Standard positions, in order to function and do what they are meant for, need to make complex matters more manageable. In doing so, however, they risk furthering a simplified understanding of key concepts simply because standard positions need to assume that we are dealing with the same concepts, even though, at closer inspection, we may not be. For example, Honderich claims that '[i]ncompatibilism and compatibilism are answers to a question with a false presupposition, that we have but one conception of freedom or one important conception, and they themselves assert or presuppose that falsehood' (2005, p. 146). It remains an open question, however, whether different historical and contemporary notions of freedom can be assumed to correspond with one another to the degree that they can be referred to more or less interchangeably.¹⁸

Beyond the historical aspect, there is also the question of whether the sometimes blurred line between metaphysical assumptions and observations about

human psychology and behaviour do not also add some to the opaqueness of the free will problem. P. F. Strawson's influential paper 'Freedom and Resentment' (2013) speaks to this important issue. Strawson's focus is upon the social and moral function of what he calls our ordinary inter-personal attitudes *vis-à-vis* our striving for a purely objective view informed by our metaphysical assumptions. He poses the following questions:

What effect would, or should, the acceptance of the truth of a general thesis of determinism have upon these reactive attitudes? More specifically, would, or should, the acceptance of the truth of the thesis lead to the decay or the repudiation of all such attitudes? Would, or should, it mean the end of gratitude, resentment, and forgiveness; of all reciprocated adult loves; of all the essentially *personal* antagonisms?

(P. F. Strawson, 2013, p. 80, emphasis in original)

The problem, as Strawson perceives it, of assuming that a purely objective view can (and should) override and interfere with our ordinary inter-personal attitudes is that it tends to underestimate the moral fabric interwoven into our everyday behaviour and the expressions of our psychological constitution. He concludes:

It is far from wrong to emphasize the efficacy of all those practices which express or manifest our moral attitudes, in regulating behaviour in ways considered desirable; or to add that when certain of our beliefs about the efficacy of some of these practices turn out to be false, then we may have good reason for dropping or modifying those practices. What *is* wrong is to forget that these practices, and their reception, the reactions to them, really *are* expressions of our moral attitudes and not merely devices we calculatingly employ for regulative purposes. Our practices do not merely exploit our natures, they express them.

(P. F. Strawson, 2013, p. 93, emphasis in original)

The tension between the metaphysics and the psychology of free will is something that we will certainly have cause to return to.¹⁹ Suffice it to say, for the moment, that Strawson's warning is clearly warranted, and that as much as our metaphysical assumptions about free will are important to evaluate, we would do well not to forget the reality of the psychological and social aspects of our ordinary beliefs about free will. This obviously complicates the issue of providing a clear overview of the free will problem as it illustrates that it is in fact not one problem but several potential (frequently overlapping) problems, depending on our vantage point. Looked at from this perspective, as much as the previous section was meant to sort out the different key approaches to the free will problem and to lay them out in a clear and transparent manner, it may just as well have muddied the waters trying to tidy up and cover cracks that were never served by being covered in the first place. So, let's try a different approach.

Beyond the standard positions: Spinoza's counterintuitive conception of necessitated freedom

One way of approaching the history of philosophy – as already touched upon in the Introduction to this book – that is markedly different from an approach whereby we seek to bring order to the present by organising the past, is to turn to the past in order to trouble the present. Rather than tracing different standard positions historically in the hope of arriving at a full picture of the family tree of the free will problem, so to speak, we might turn to the history of philosophy as a resource for turning our basic assumptions on their head. To this end, Melamed proposes that ‘past philosophers can be most relevant to our current philosophical discussion, to the extent that they provide us with *well-motivated challenges to our commonsense beliefs*’ (2013, p. 259, emphasis in original). It is, as already indicated in the Introduction, from this standpoint that we will approach Spinoza and his counterintuitive conception of freedom as necessitated rather than as freedom from constraint or the freedom to do otherwise.

Before turning our attention to Spinoza's understanding of freedom, it is called for to pause briefly in order to reflect on the overall methodology of this book. This book is not primarily intended as an historical investigation of Spinoza's philosophy and its implications for educational thought. Rather, it is intended as an investigation into the role of free will in educational theory and practice, using Spinoza's counterintuitive conceptions of necessitated freedom and a naturalised will as ways of troubling and interrogating more dominant beliefs in education. This means that Spinoza's philosophy will be used to contrast with more dominant theoretical accounts so as to illustrate and make explicit their tacit presuppositions and so as to attempt to stake out a point of departure that leads to a path less well-traveled. Practically, this means that we will begin our discussions of autonomy and education (in Chapter 2) and moral responsibility and moral education (in Chapter 4) by outlining a more general understanding of how beliefs about free will feature in and impact on educational contexts, before turning to Spinoza to explore alternative ways of conceiving the same problems from a very different vantage point. We will begin applying this method in what follows of this chapter by introducing an understanding of freedom that differs markedly from the conceptions already outlined previously.

In order to arrive at a good understanding of Spinoza's conception of freedom it helps to begin by outlining his overarching rationalist framework. The reason for this is that Spinoza's ethical theory – framing his understanding of freedom – is very much conditioned by his rationalism. In brief, Spinoza's rationalism states that all things are explainable according to the same basic principles. That is, nothing is exempt from the governing laws of nature and the way to understand things must therefore be the same regardless of which particular thing one aims to explain. Spinoza states this explicitly in the Preface to Part 3 of the *Ethics*:

[T]he laws and rules of Nature, according to which all things happen, and change from one form to another, are always and everywhere the same. So

the way of understanding the nature of anything, of whatever kind, must also be the same, namely, through the universal laws and rules of Nature.

(E3pref)

Jonathan Bennett (1984) refers to this as Spinoza's 'explanatory rationalism' (p. 29) and it argues that, 1) the world is explainable in principle and that, 2) the only way to explain things rationally is by understanding their chains of natural causes. For Spinoza (as for his predecessor Descartes), the world may be approached in terms of things being either self-caused or things being caused by external things (E1a1). Spinoza thereby asserts that all things can be explained through their causes. If we understand a thing's cause, we understand what it is essentially, i.e. what is necessary for it to be conceivable (E2D2). When something is self-caused it is self-explained and when it is caused by something external to it, it needs to be explained through these external causes. The only self-caused thing Spinoza will admit is God or Nature (E1p14 by E1D3),²⁰ which corresponds to nature as indivisible and fully active substance. Everything else – i.e. all the particular things that are *in* God or Nature – is, to different degrees, caused by something else (E1D5). The will, for Spinoza – as we will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 3 – can therefore not be understood in terms of a uniquely human faculty capable of self-causation, but must be conceived in strictly naturalistic terms.

The essence of particular things, for Spinoza, is the striving to become more self-explained and thereby more self-caused (E3p6). The way to become more self-explained is, as indicated in the scheme outlined previously, to come to understand oneself better. The more we understand ourselves rationally, the more we can explain ourselves, and the more self-determined we will become. Insofar as the striving for self-preservation and self-determination is an ethical concern for Spinoza, it follows that reason, by virtue of which we become more self-determined, is itself an ethical concern. That is, to be able to explain ourselves and the world around us in rational terms is, for Spinoza, an ethical matter insofar as this will be conducive to our happiness and to our gradual freedom from external causes.

There is a seeming tension between Spinoza's ethical ideal of self-determination and his deterministic metaphysics positing that everything in nature is causally determined by something else. It begs the question of what it means for a thing to strive in a world conceived in strictly deterministic terms. It is clear that striving, from Spinoza's point of view, does not imply the freedom to act contrary to our nature. It does not involve a free will if by this we mean an uncaused will arising spontaneously. On the contrary, the more we act from our nature as striving things, the more freedom we acquire. As Karolina Hübner notes:

For this reason, striving has to be understood in conditional or hypothetical terms, as a claim about what a thing *would* do, were it left to its own devices, and per impossible free from the influence of things more powerful and essentially different from it (E4a1).

(2017, p. 357, emphasis in original)

Since we are always under the influence of external things, however, our striving to be self-determined is always hampered. This natural limitation is what sets the stage for Spinoza's ethical theory to begin with. It posits that there is a sense in which we all strive to become free and that this striving is an essential feature of our nature as striving things. Since there are other things in nature (whose striving is potentially detrimental to us) striving at the same time, however, the ethical project concerns finding out which things will empower us and which will not.

Spinoza's *Ethics* may be read as a general guide to the formation of a good character where a good character is characterised by a good understanding of natural causation. It begins with an overarching metaphysical system establishing that everything that exists is an expression (mode) of nature (substance) and that what define these things is the striving to persevere and flourish in being (E3p7). All things are the same in this regard. Spinoza moves on to his account of the human mind (being another thing determined to strive for perseverance) in order to establish a path to human freedom. By conceiving of the human mind as a finite mode, he equates it with the mind of any other finite mode, albeit relatively more complex than most other known minds.²¹ For Spinoza, there is nothing exceptional about a human being that would warrant an elevated status from the perspective of nature *qua* substance. This has led some commentators to label Spinoza an anti-humanist (see e.g. Melamed, 2011). This is not to say, however, that Spinoza is uninterested in matters concerning human well-being, quite the opposite, but it serves to highlight the fact that he refuses to adjust his account of the human being according to popular fictions and superstitions. This is evident from the fact that Spinoza's account of the affects follows his general metaphysical outline. Accordingly, he states that he will 'consider human actions and appetites just as if it were a question of lines, planes, and bodies' (E3pref). This way we see that rationality and ethics are inseparable concepts for Spinoza.

Freedom, for Spinoza, is not opposed to determinism. On the contrary, Spinoza defines freedom as follows: 'That thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone' (E1D7). In a letter to G. H. Schuller, Spinoza remarks: 'You see, then, that I place freedom not in a free decree, but in a free necessity' (Ep. 58, p. 427).²² On Spinoza's view, total freedom entails total self-determination. The only thing that is self-determined in this sense is, as we have seen, substance (E1p14), being both self-caused and self-sustained. Everything else is necessarily caused by something else and is dependent on other things for its existence (E1p28). This means that human freedom is necessarily limited by external causes and that the human will is just as causally determined as anything else in nature. Accordingly, Spinoza's definition of the will corresponds with his definition of appetite (except in relation to the mind only), as the striving to persevere (E3p9s). The act of willing something for Spinoza is not understood as a spontaneous act or an uncaused choice, but as an instantiation of the desire to persevere in being conditioned by specific circumstances (precluding any real sense of voluntariness). Spinoza concludes:

This is that famous human freedom everyone brags of having, which consists only in this: that men are conscious of their appetite and ignorant of the

causes by which they are determined. So the infant believes that he freely wants the milk; the angry boy that he wants vengeance; and the timid, flight. Again, the drunk believes it is from a free decision of the mind that he says those things which afterward, when sober, he wishes he had not said. Similarly, the madman, the chatterbox, and a great many people of this kind believe that they act from a free decision of the mind, and not that they are set in motion by an impulse.

(Ep. 58, p. 428)

To be free, on Spinoza's account, is therefore to understand the causes of one's decisions. The more I understand, the more freedom from external causes I acquire. This obviously circumscribes human agency severely, and naturalising the will also renders moral responsibility problematic. Being confronted about his denial of moral responsibility, Spinoza contends: 'As for what he adds next: *that if we affirmed this, all wickedness would be excusable*, what of it? For evil men are no less to be feared, nor are they any less harmful, when they are necessarily harmful' (Ep. 58, p. 430, emphasis in original).²³ As is evident from this brief quote, Spinoza seems relatively unconcerned by the consequences of his naturalistic conception of morality. In his *Metaphysical Thoughts* he concludes: 'If only those were fit to be punished whom we feign to sin only from freedom, why do men try to exterminate poisonous snakes? For they only sin from their own nature, nor can they do otherwise' (CM II, 8/p. 331).^{24 25} Spinoza's reasoning here is reminiscent of Thomas Nagel's (1989) *external standpoint*, where actions are viewed not from the internal perspective of the agent but from the external perspective of the world. With regards to moral responsibility, Nagel concludes that '[t]he radically external standpoint that produces the philosophical problem of responsibility seems to make every alternative ineligible. We see the agent as a phenomenon generated by the world of which he is a part' (p. 122). As a result, 'the external standpoint sees the alternatives not as alternatives for the agent, but as alternatives for the *world*, which *involve* the agent. And the world, of course, is not an agent and cannot be held responsible' (p. 123, emphasis in original).

What is striking about Spinoza's account of freedom is that while it is quite clear that he denies humans the causal agency that is typically assumed to allow for freedom of the will and moral responsibility, he maintains that we do have the ability to become more autonomous *vis-à-vis* external causes, relatively speaking. Yet it is difficult to label him a compatibilist since his conception of freedom is so far removed from the kind of freedom that involves freedom from constraint, the freedom to do otherwise or self-causation. His freedom is severely circumscribed by his causal determinism and it is a kind of freedom that is not exclusive for human beings (even if humans tend to exhibit more freedom than other things in nature). It is the freedom to understand, and the more we understand, the more we will accept the limits of our nature, he suggests. This will allow us to escape the bondage of believing that we can do otherwise and to focus instead on understanding the reasons behind our necessitated choices. Before delving deeper into Spinoza's peculiar understanding of the will (and of the human tendency to believe in free will), however, it will be helpful to first focus on the

notion of autonomy. Autonomy plays an important part in the free will problem and it will allow us a concrete entryway into the free will problem in education.

Nagel (1989) identifies two main aspects of the free will problem: the problem of autonomy and the problem of moral responsibility. These aspects are closely connected and where the problem of autonomy concerns how we conceive of our own freedom, the problem of moral responsibility concerns how we conceive of the freedom of others. Clearly, then, how we understand the first aspect reflects on and influences how we understand the second. In the next chapter we will begin our investigation of the free will problem in an educational context by taking on the problem of autonomy in education. This will allow us a vantage point from where to appreciate the stakes of the free will problem in education and from where we can then move on to look at the related problem of moral responsibility in education.

Notes

- 1 Ted Honderich aptly summarises the requirements of a free or spontaneous decision: ‘Thus it is said of an individual’s decision at a time that he could have decided otherwise than he did, given all things as they then were, and given all of the past as it was’ (2005, pp. 36–37).
- 2 It is unsolvable in the sense that there is no one universally valid solution to it. Depending on our overall metaphysical outlook, the answer to the problem will inevitably change. If we allow for supernatural explanations, free will is not necessarily a problem at all. If, however, we subscribe to a deterministic understanding of the natural world, free will can either be deemed unrealistic or else we have to explain how it is that it can be made compatible with the law-like regularities of natural causation. Similarly, if we approach the free will problem with different understandings of agency, we may find that ‘these controversies are reflections of irresolvable tensions in our thoughts about agency’ (Watson, 2013, p. 24). In brief, as Peter van Inwagen concludes in his seminal defence of free will: ‘I do not think that there is any way we can simply *find out* whether we have free will in the sense in which we can find out whether there is life on Jupiter’ (1983, p. 204, emphasis in original). A different but related position asserts that while we do not have the knowledge necessary to solve the free will problem as it stands, because we lack sufficient knowledge about the workings of the human brain, we might one day arrive at such an understanding, allowing us to solve the problem (see for example Searle, 2004, p. 151). As Pereboom notes: ‘Thus there remains the epistemic possibility that there are human neurophysiological structures that are significantly disanalogous with anything else in nature we understand’ (2001, p. 86). To say that it is epistemically possible is not, however, the same as saying that it is likely.
- 3 In fact, for Harry Frankfurt, the concept of a person may even be defined as ‘the concept of a type of entity for whom the freedom of its will may be a problem’ (2013a, p. 330).
- 4 One way of approaching this distinction is to claim that it comes down to the difference between rational power and natural power, where the capacity of free will – as a rational power – is understood as a ‘power that may or may not be exercised – issue in something – when all the necessary conditions of its being exercised obtain,’ whereas a natural power, in contrast, ‘is such that it is exercised when all the necessary conditions of exercise obtain’ (Honderich, 2005, p 51).

- 5 While we will return to this issue later, it deserves mentioning that motivating a philosophical stance by referring to its possible consequences for everyday morality is not unproblematic. As David Hume rightly warns: ‘There is no method of reasoning more common, and yet none more blameable, than in philosophical debates to endeavour to refute any hypothesis by a pretext of its dangerous consequences to religion and morality’ (Hume, 2000, p. 263/*Treatise* 2.3.2).
- 6 In a contemporary context, this ‘being more than the sum of her parts’ is typically grounded in the understanding of a human being as a *mental subject* endowed with self-consciousness. Being a free agent, on this account, requires ‘a mental subject that is in some way or other properly distinguished from all its particular thoughts (beliefs, desires, etc.); a mental subject that is moreover present to itself as such in some way’ (G. Strawson, 2010, p. 140).
- 7 Peter van Inwagen deals with this issue by adjusting his interpretation of ‘laws of nature’ so as not to include human behaviour. He writes: ‘“laws of nature” in the sequel shall be by definition propositions that apply non-vacuously to things that are *not* rational agents’ (1983, p. 64, emphasis in original).
- 8 Early versions of deterministic accounts are present in the thought of Ancient Greek atomists like Leucippus and Democritus who argued for a mechanistic understanding of the world.
- 9 In terms of human desires being causally determined, C. D. Broad describes the causal relation as follows: ‘My doing of *A* is completely determined by a total cause which contains as factors my desire to do *A* and my desire to do *B*, each of which has a certain determinate strength and persistence. The preponderance of my desire to do *A* over my desire to do *B*, in respect of strength and persistence, is completely determined by a total cause which contains as a factor my putting forth a certain amount of effort to reinforce my desire for *A*’ (1934, pp. 40–41).
- 10 Freedom, in this weaker or negative sense, means ‘nothing but the absence of certain conditions the presence of which would make moral condemnation or punishment inappropriate’ (P. F. Strawson, 2013, p. 73).
- 11 Another way for the compatibilist to navigate in this issue is to follow Hillary Bok (1998) in making a distinction between theoretical and practical reasoning, where theoretical reasoning serves to describe causal connections in the world and practical reasoning serves to investigate the justification of actions, and where these two spheres of reasoning are kept apart from one another.
- 12 For a critical discussion of Frankfurt’s attack on the principle of alternate possibilities from a libertarian point of view, see Widerker (1995).
- 13 As Pereboom observes: ‘We feel that the way in which we are the source of our actions is very different from the way a machine is the source of what it produces. We express this sense of difference by attributing moral responsibility to human beings but not to machines’ (2001, p. xiv).
- 14 Libertarians, therefore, not only need to argue against causal determinism, they need to make a plausible case for causal origination so that an agent’s action can be showed to be undetermined by external causes yet sufficiently controlled by the agent’s will to allow for moral responsibility. Put differently, a successful libertarian account of free will needs to negotiate carefully between indeterminism and pure chance. Accordingly, Galen Strawson writes: ‘It appears that libertarianism must establish not only that some at least of our desires are undetermined, in their occurrence or presence in us, by anything that is external to us, but also that we are able to determine what some at least of them are’ (2010, p. 38). For a critical discussion of the coherence of agent-causal libertarianism see Chapter 2 of Pereboom’s *Living Without Free Will* (2001). For a defence of the consistency between indeterminism and causal control see Kane (1999).

- 15 For a lengthier discussion of Augustine's position on free will and in what sense he may be labelled a libertarian, see Stump (2001).
- 16 David Carr notes that 'it would be hard to exaggerate the influence of [Kant's] ethics on contemporary social, political and educational theorising' (2003, p. 79). For example, influential liberal moral theorists like John Rawls (1985) are clearly indebted to the Kantian ethical tradition.
- 17 For an in-depth discussion of Kant's notion of transcendental freedom and his libertarian position on free will, see Pereboom (2006).
- 18 On this note, Manekin describes the inherent difficulty with labelling past philosophers as 'compatibilists' or 'incompatibilists' with reference to the phrase 'free will.' Exemplifying, he writes that: 'Jewish philosophers in the Middle Ages spoke primarily of "choice" (*behirah*) or "will" (*ratzon*) and their main question was not whether the will was free, but rather whether human choice was efficacious' (2014, p. 37).
- 19 The strategy I will employ (in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6), in order to counter P. F. Strawson's assumption that determinism poses a threat to our ordinary interpersonal attitudes, is to follow Spinoza in distinguishing between false beliefs – which are detrimental to our overall understanding of nature – and valuable fictions – which are inadequate yet wilfully entertained representations of nature. Valuable fictions, it is argued, are useful because they compensate for an innate privation of knowledge, whereas false beliefs are not.
- 20 Unlike Descartes who reserves a special metaphysical position for humans as a kind of self-sustained substance – albeit one that is caused by God – thereby ensuring that the doctrine of the immortality of the human soul is safeguarded.
- 21 Spinoza is a panpsychist in the sense that he believes that each body, no matter how simple and inactive, is paralleled by a mind. For a more developed discussion on Spinoza's panpsychism see Della Rocca (1996, pp. 7–9) and Bennett (1984, pp. 135–139).
- 22 References to Spinoza's correspondence are to Curley's translation in *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, Vol. 2 (Spinoza, 2016).
- 23 Naturalising morality in a way that makes moral responsibility redundant may be understood as a direct consequence of a deterministic conception of the world. As Pereboom remarks: 'because a person's actions are the result of processes over which he has no control, we cannot consider him responsible for them, just as we cannot hold earthquakes or epidemics responsible for their effects' (2001, p. 154).
- 24 References to Spinoza's *Metaphysical Thoughts* (CM) are to Curley's (Spinoza, 1985) translation.
- 25 In order to illustrate why the conviction and imprisonment of dangerous criminals do not have to rely on their moral responsibility, Pereboom offers the comparative example of the isolation of carriers of contagious diseases: 'If a child is a carrier of the Ebola virus by its being passed on to her at birth from her parents, quarantine is nevertheless intuitively legitimate' (2001, p. 174).

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2 Education and autonomy

Freedom and education

What motivates education? From where does education draw its lifeblood? Arguably, education and the striving for freedom – individually or collectively conceived – are joined at the root. One might say that by becoming educated we hope to increase our freedom, and, conversely, by increasing our freedom we hope to gain in wisdom. As proclaimed by Alfred North Whitehead in *The Aims of Education and Other Essays*: ‘The only avenue towards wisdom is by freedom in the presence of knowledge’ (1967, p. 30). From Plato’s allegory of the Cave to Rousseau’s *Émile*, the core message is one and the same: to be educated is to become free; free from the bondage of ignorance, and free from the oppression of living according to the opinions of others. Education, in this sense, is deeply connected with the human striving to do something more than simply surviving.¹ As to what this something more actually constitutes, however, well, herein lies the problem. Because what is it to become free, to flourish, to form a life motivated by something more than basic survival? Metaphysically speaking, this is a question without any clear-cut answers. Insofar as education needs to posit human freedom as a goal, however, it appears important to explore the substance of this goal in order to be able to evaluate its merits and in order to posit realistic means for attaining such a goal. It is from this position we might approach the concept of autonomy and its role for education.

In this chapter we will begin by fleshing out our understanding of the concept of autonomy in relation to human freedom. Insofar as autonomy intersects with self-causation and volitional control, we will revisit some of the terrain already covered in the previous chapter, and we will rehearse and develop some of the arguments introduced there. While the focus of Chapter 1 was more pronouncedly on understanding freedom in relation to self-causation (and on some of the problems with assuming self-causation), this chapter will focus more on understanding autonomy as autonomy (and the development of autonomy) allows us a concrete point of entry into the field of education. After reviewing the concept of autonomy more broadly, we will investigate different possible aspects of autonomy such as they relate to education and educational thought. Having explored some of the central aspects of autonomy in an educational context we

will then narrow in on autonomy and self-determination from the point of view of Spinoza's peculiar understanding of autonomy, not in terms of self-causation but in terms of self-understanding. This will allow us to begin fleshing out an alternative understanding of autonomy in education, to be developed and evaluated further in this book.

Freedom and autonomy: am I the author of my actions?

To be free is, as we have seen in the previous chapter, often conceived in terms of the ability to do otherwise. The ability to do otherwise, in turn, is often related to the assumed autonomy of the agent. Thomas Nagel (1989) outlines what he calls 'our ordinary conception of autonomy,' describing autonomy in the way it is commonly referred to and used. I find it useful to offer his description of this ordinary conception in full simply because, as we will come to see in this chapter, it corresponds well with the notion of autonomy referred or alluded to in much contemporary educational theory and practice. Nagel writes that autonomy presents itself

as the belief that antecedent circumstances, including the condition of the agent, leave some of the things we will do undetermined: they are determined only by our choices, which are motivationally explicable but not themselves causally determined. Although many of the external and internal conditions of choice are inevitably fixed by the world and not under my control, some range of open possibilities is generally presented to me on an occasion of action – and when by acting I make one of those possibilities actual, the final explanation of this (once the background which defines the possibilities has been taken into account) is given by the intentional explanation of my action, which is comprehensible only through my point of view. My reason for doing it is the *whole* reason why it happened, and no further explanation is either necessary or possible.

(Nagel, 1989, pp. 114–115, emphasis in original)

This conception of personal autonomy, where I am the author of my actions, is one way of approaching the concept of autonomy from the point of view of everyday language and imagery. It is a conception that focuses on the choice-making abilities of a person. Such an understanding of an autonomous agent may be summarised as follows: 'I am the source of my own activity, not merely in a relative sense as the most proximate and salient locus of an unbroken chain of causal transactions leading up to the event, but fundamentally, in a way not prefigured by what has gone before' (O'Connor, 2013, p. 257). We might, however, follow Gerald Dworkin in starting by identifying the basic idea underpinning most available accounts of autonomy:

The central idea that underlies the concept of autonomy is indicated by the etymology of the term: *autos* (self) and *nomos* (rule or law). The term was

first applied to the Greek city state. A city had *autonomia* when its citizens made their own laws, as opposed to being under the control of some conquering power.

(Dworkin, 1988, pp. 12–13)

On Dworkin's account, the ancient conception of autonomy brings us right back to the idea of *causa sui*. To be autonomous is to be able to make one's own laws and to function independent of alien forces. What we end up with as a common denominator appears to be some version of freedom from constraint in combination with some version of agential control. This gives us a broad spectrum of possible ways of interpreting autonomy however. The question we should ask is perhaps not 'What is autonomy?' but 'What conception of autonomy has proven most influential in terms of shaping contemporary educational debate?' What becomes important from an educational point of view is not primarily that those to be educated are liberated from all forms of constraint (because sometimes we *wish* to impose external constraints upon ourselves), but that they may develop the ability 'to reflect upon and adopt attitudes towards their first-order desires, wishes and intentions' (Dworkin, 1988, p. 15). By developing this ability, it is believed that they would gain more control over their volitions. This approach to autonomy, where a person is considered autonomous if his or her choices are endorsed by processes of critical reflection, may be labelled a *hierarchical model of personal autonomy*. It is hierarchical in the sense that it requires first-order desires to be supported by second-order reflections in order to count as truly autonomous. More specifically, Dworkin identifies 'the capacity to raise the question of whether I will identify with or reject the reasons for which I now act' (p. 15) to be the mark of an autonomous person. Whether or not this capacity needs to be cultivated through education is debatable however. What we might say is that cultivating autonomy in this sense has indeed been defended as a legitimate aim of education (see Morgan, 1996).

Frankfurt (2013a) has offered another hierarchical account of autonomy where self-governance is not simply a matter of acting on one's desires but of having second-order volitions that endorse one's desires. Offering the example of *the unwilling addict*, Frankfurt endeavours to explain the machinery behind the autonomy of a person. The unwilling addict has first-order desires – he or she desires the effects of the drug but at the same time also desires to abstain from drugs. The unwilling addict also has second-order volitions – desires about which desire is to constitute his or her will. Identifying with one of the first-order desires rather than the other, Frankfurt claims that the unwilling addict may identify the desire to do drugs as being against his or her own will, and the desire to abstain from drugs as being consistent with his or her own will. Consequently, Frankfurt concludes that '[w]hen a *person* acts, the desire by which he is moved is either the will he wants or a will he wants to be without' (p. 330, emphasis in original). Being autonomous, from this perspective, therefore means acting on first-order desires that are moved by second-order volitions identified as being in conformity with the person's will. The strategy of hinging autonomy on

second- or higher-order volitions has been much debated. Gary Watson (2013), for example, has suggested that there is no reason to believe that higher-order volitions enjoy the special status that Frankfurt grants them in his model of personal autonomy. Another related concern raised by Frankfurt's account has to do with the problem of infinite regress. In short, if a first-order desire needs to be endorsed by a second-order volition to count as autonomous, then what is to say that second-order volitions do not, in turn, need the endorsement of third-order desires and volitions and so on to infinity? In response to this concern, Frankfurt argues that, by identifying with a first-order desire decisively, a person can commit to it in a way that “resounds” throughout a potentially endless array of higher orders’ (2013a, p. 332).

Dworkin's and Frankfurt's hierarchical accounts of personal autonomy have proven influential in the philosophical debate on autonomy and in educational theories of autonomy. It has even been suggested that these accounts give ‘expression to the fundamental presupposition of self-determination in much educational practice and pedagogical theory’ (Cuypers, 1992, p. 5). As we will see shortly, this conception of autonomy has opened up room for educational theorists to carve out a potential space between indoctrination and educational influence where external constraints need not be assumed to exclude personal autonomy. At the centre of these accounts is still the agent's choice-making ability,² and as such one could argue that they have much in common with Nagel's (1989) ordinary conception of autonomy even if they may not accept the full consequence of self-causation or assume the existence of free will in a libertarian sense.

Autonomy through education

In his ‘Autonomy as an educational ideal,’ R. F. Dearden compares the formation of an autonomous person through education to the formation of an autonomous state through politics:

If we do attend to childhood, we may find there educational policies, comparable to political policies, aimed at ‘making’ children autonomous. Appropriate expectations, encouragements, praises, and modes of talk are addressed to children by parents and teachers, with varying degrees of success. The criteria which are to serve as the *nomoi* of thought and action may be similarly taught to the child. And with the acquisition of a socially transmitted concept of himself as autonomous, the child, like the ex-colony, may well then go on to think and act in ways unforeseen by his teachers, and doubtless also in ways that would not always be approved by them.

(Dearden, 1975, pp. 6–7)

The autonomous person, Dearden concludes, ‘has a mind of his own and acts according to it. And this “mind of his own” will typically be no purely natural product, but the outcome of one sort of education’ (p. 7). Education, then,

can fortify personal autonomy by supporting the ability to reflect, reason and develop judgement. It is not enough, Dearden argues, for an account of autonomy to refer to mere freedom from constraint, an autonomous person must explain his or her thoughts and acts in a way that ‘include a reference to his own choices, deliberations, decisions, reflections, judgements, plannings or reasonings’ (1972, p. 453).

Dearden’s account of autonomy as an educational ideal has met with critique from philosophers of education. Carolyn Stone (1990), for example, claims that Rearden’s one-sided focus on traditionally ‘masculine’ capacities, such as reasoning, downplays the importance of ‘feminine’ qualities such as feelings, emotions and desires for the formation of autonomous thought and action. Consequently, Stone argues that Dearden’s account of autonomy falls short of an adequate educational ideal. Stefaan Cuypers (1992) argues against the position that autonomy should be considered the premier principle of education. The problem, as Cuypers perceives it, is that it is unclear how education can have as an ideal something that assumes that external influences (such as a teacher’s guidance) are alienating properties hindering the process of becoming autonomous. Instead, Cuypers suggests that the principle of *caring about oneself* – as a process hinged on learning to care about other things as a way of becoming free of ‘self-centred preoccupations’ (p. 11) – is a more appropriate ideal of education. Personal autonomy, Cuypers contends, is undesirable as an educational ideal insofar as it places too much focus on becoming autonomous from social context and that caring for oneself is more apt if ‘we want our children to become *devoted* and *sociable* people instead of detached observers or cool manipulators’ (p. 15, emphasis in original).

Despite being ‘elevated by many to the status of the primary and coordinating aim of all educational endeavour’ (2006, p. 535), Michael Hand argues that Dearden’s influential account is insufficient and even redundant insofar as it assumes that personal autonomy ‘is a necessary feature of personhood and therefore plainly will not serve as an aim of education’ (p. 536). Hand contends that all accounts of autonomy that resemble or draw from the ordinary usage of the term fail as educational aims insofar as they either assume that autonomy hinges on ‘the absence of externally imposed rule’ (p. 537), making it purely *circumstantial* (in which case it is questionable that it can be acquired through education), or that autonomy springs from decisions unaffected by external forces, making it *dispositional*. The problem with dispositional autonomy, according to Hand, is that it is unclear in what sense decisions that are internal are better than decisions that spring from external influence or guidance. Self-determination, for Hand, is not an obvious aim of education because we often need to rely on those more experienced and knowledgeable to direct us in our decision-making.

Jeffrey Morgan (1996), on the other hand, defends a hierarchical account of autonomy, arguing that the capacity of critically reflecting on, and modifying, first-order desires is indeed a valid educational ideal. The emphasis in Morgan’s understanding of autonomy, however, ‘is not on choice, but on the overall coherence of the various aspects of identity with each other.’ Morgan argues that it is a person’s disposition to rationality that can ensure ‘critical self-reflection aimed

at increasing and maintaining coherence of the self’ (p. 246). The concept of the will is still central for Morgan’s understanding of autonomy as he takes the will to be the defining feature of a person. More specifically, he follows Dworkin and Frankfurt in taking the reflexivity of the will to be constitutive of personal autonomy. Morgan concludes by embracing personal autonomy as a valid ideal of education, arguing that ‘[t]o embrace autonomy as an ideal is to accept the importance of self-government in human life’ (p. 250).

Whatever we think of autonomy as an educational ideal, it stands clear that it has been and will continue to be a very influential and frequently referred to concept in different attempts to ground education in some form of foundational value or aim (see for example Brighouse, 2009). It is therefore important to continue probing its implications if we are to understand more clearly how it relates to the free will problem in education. This will help us appreciate the stakes involved before turning to Spinoza’s thoroughly deterministic account of self-understanding as an alternative route to autonomy that bypasses the notion of the will as an independent faculty.

Christopher Winch opens his book *Education, Autonomy and Critical Thinking* (2006) by suggesting that ‘a society’s education system is one of the key means through which individuals become autonomous’ (p. 1). This is not a controversial suggestion. In fact, in light of the aforementioned, I would even go so far as to say that the link between education and the promotion of autonomy is foundational in the sense that autonomy is frequently portrayed as one of the principle aims of liberal education. By this I mean that other aims of education – such as the aim of teaching children to read and write – are typically grounded in the promotion of autonomy in one way or another. Of course, what we mean by autonomy may differ.³ Accordingly, to be able to evaluate the role of the promotion of autonomy for education we need to investigate different aspects and understandings of autonomy.

Autonomy, manipulation and critical thinking

In his *Moral Development and Moral Education* (2015a), R. S. Peters establishes that ‘[e]tymologically “autonomy” suggests that a person accepts or makes rules for himself’ (p. 121). To be autonomous, on this account, thereby precludes being manipulated into certain behaviours rather than others. That is, ‘there must be some feature of a course of conduct [. . .] which constitutes a non-artificial reason for pursuing it as distinct from extrinsic reasons provided by praise and blame, reward and punishment, and so on, which are artificially created by the demands of others’ (ibid.). Determining whether a reason is artificial, in turn, involves distinguishing between authentic and inauthentic reasons. Following Peters, Cuypers (2009) suggests that ‘a choice is autonomous only if it causally issues from antecedent springs of action, such as beliefs and desires, which are “authentic” or “truly the agent’s own,” as opposed to being inauthentic or alien’ (p. 126). In short, being manipulated into making a choice – through brainwashing or indoctrination – would render the choice inauthentic, whereas

an authentic choice springs from self-caused reasons or beliefs. In an educational context, this presents something of a dilemma insofar as '[t]he intention to educate might be connected with the aim to influence, to guide, to control or determine someone else's behaviour and development' (Giesinger, 2010, p. 515). Precisely how and where to draw the line between manipulation – resulting in inauthentic reasons – and educational influence – resulting in authentic reasons – is by no means clear-cut. The distinction nevertheless seems pivotal for education insofar as the aim of education is taken to be the promotion rather than the stifling of autonomy.

If autonomy precludes manipulation, it seems to run parallel with critical thinking, at least in some crucial respects. One such aspect relates to the notion that in order to avoid inauthenticity students need to acquire proper (self-caused) reasons that can guide their decision-making. Such reasons are commonly understood to require a rational grounding. That is, a student's reasons need to 'either present evidence for a particular belief or a backing for accepting such evidence were it to be true' (Winch, 2006, p. 32). Moreover, Winch goes on to argue, these reasons need to agree with a given epistemic community in order for the evidence presented to be evaluable according to some generally accepted standard of evaluation. Winch labels the 'ability to employ one's rationality in a critical way' (p. 4) *critical rationality*. It is this critical rationality that is assumed to allow students to critically analyse and evaluate the different consequences of available choices in relation to various established notions of individual and collective well-being. On Winch's account, the cultivation of critical rationality is therefore 'not merely a requirement for the development of individual autonomy [. . .] but also for the development of good citizens' (p. 11). One of the aims of public education, in the context of the promotion of individual and collective well-being, would therefore be to allow for the acquisition of the skills and character traits necessary to make informed and critical choices irrespective of the social position or the economic status of the students. It follows from this conceptualisation of critical rationality that the cultivation of autonomy through education is deeply intertwined with the promotion of personal decision-making. It may be of little surprise, then, that personal decision-making features as a central element of many versions of contemporary character education (Ravven, 2013).

Autonomy, decision-making and moral responsibility

At least since Kant, moral autonomy in western philosophy has become more or less synonymous with personal decision-making. Aristotle – often identified as the founder of the philosophy of moral autonomy (Eshleman, 2014) – offered a decidedly different understanding of autonomy from that of the subsequent Kantian tradition. Whereas Kantian freedom is typically assumed to be unaffected by events in the empirical world (the world of appearances) (Giesinger, 2010), Aristotle's understanding of autonomy is of a capacity that follows naturally from a well-developed or virtuous character. A virtuous character, in turn, is thought to be the fruit of arduous practical labour. For Aristotle, good

decision-making is the natural outcome of having developed a virtuous character rather than a capacity rendering humans exempt from natural causation. Kantian freedom, in contrast, ‘cannot be attributed to any natural human sentiments or dispositions but can be attributed [. . .] to the noumenal self which lies beyond any empirical knowledge we may have of our inner phenomenal nature’ (Carr, 1991, p. 80).⁴ The Kantian brand of freedom, introduced in the previous chapter, is commonly referred to as *transcendental freedom*.⁵ Allen W. Wood explains transcendental freedom as follows: ‘When we think of ourselves as appearances, we are determined, but when we think of ourselves as moral agents, we transport ourselves into the intelligible world, where we are transcendently free’ (2008, p. 135). Put differently, natural causation determines us insofar as we operate in the corporeal world, but in terms of moral agency, we have the unique capacity of transcending the world of appearances and becoming free in a more substantial sense.

In the context of character education, being clearly indebted in many ways to Aristotelian virtue ethics, the Kantian understanding of transcendental freedom have been helpful in shifting focus from a more naturalistic understanding of the will to an understanding of the will as a capacity that sets humans apart from the rest of nature. This transformation certainly predates Kant and is typically attributed to Aquinas and other Christian thinkers who endeavoured to reconcile Aristotelianism with a more Augustinian understanding of the will to which all vices could be causally related (Kent, 1995). Through the Kantian notion of transcendental freedom, the autonomy of the will could be directly linked with the human faculty of reason. Heidi Ravven (2013, pp. 1–55) argues that this shift helps explain why personal decision-making has come to be such a defining feature of contemporary character education, even though it still retains aspects of the Aristotelian focus on the cultivation of virtue. The focus on decision-making, in turn, is intimately related with the important question of moral responsibility, making for another key vantage point from where to approach the notion of autonomy.

Before looking closer at the link between autonomy and moral responsibility, however, it is called for to first moderate the connection between Kantian freedom and the treatment of autonomy in philosophy of education. Cuypers argues convincingly that ‘Peters’ educational theory is [. . .] neutral with regard to the metaphysics of free will’ (2010, p. 191). It is quite clear, he argues, that Peters did not embrace a Kantian understanding of autonomy as a transcendental property of a person. Instead, Cuypers attributes a compatibilist position to Peters where freedom of will is always constrained by natural causation and may even, as Frankfurt (2013a) would have it, be a causally determined property in itself. Famously, Peters asserted that all children ‘can and must enter the palace of Reason through the courtyard of Habit and Tradition’ (2015a, p. 52), indicating his acknowledgement of the necessary constraints of external influences in what he called ‘the paradox of moral education.’ While Peters’ educational theory on autonomy may well be attuned with a deterministic understanding of the world, the notion of the will underlying his account of autonomy is

nevertheless that of an autonomous faculty. Cuypers outlines Peters' conception of the will as follows:

An autonomous choice is, at least, a free choice. The notion of man as a free chooser in the narrow sense is that of an agent without external and internal constraints – no chains and no compulsion that hinder him. A free choice is, then, a choice over which the agent has *control*. A free agent is an agent who has options open to him and who controls his actions by having control over his will.

(Cuypers, 2010, p. 193, emphasis in original)

Positing the will as an autonomous faculty in this sense has consequences for education – at least insofar as we wish to ground it metaphysically – as it assumes that the human will, unlike any other known empirical phenomena, follows *laws of its own making*. We will return to some of the problems bound up with positing an autonomous will when we look closer at Spinoza's naturalistic conception of the will later, but for now we need simply establish that the concept of autonomy underpinning much educational theory typically hinges on 'the notion of man as a chooser' (Peters, 2015b, p. 342).

Moral responsibility is often assumed to make for an indispensable cornerstone of morality (Baker, 2006). Moral autonomy, in turn, is commonly perceived to be the internal machinery enabling us to exercise our ability to act in a morally responsible way. Insofar as autonomy is approached from the perspective of moral autonomy, then, autonomy and moral responsibility intersect. One of the more interesting and controversial aspects of this intersection concerns the important link between moral responsibility and self-causation. Let me offer an illustrating example borrowed from the context of contemporary philosophy of education:

The analysis we favor is that a person is morally responsible for performing an action if and only if he is an agent of an appropriate sort, he performs the action on the basis of the belief that he is doing something morally obligatory, right, or wrong, he has responsibility-grounding control in performing the action, *and the action causally issues from authentic actional springs*.

(Haji & Cuypers, 2008, p. 8, emphasis added)

This quote illustrates the metaphysical stakes involved in the philosophical grounding of moral responsibility. Recall that moral responsibility, when it comes down to it, requires some sense of causal efficacy where a moral agent can be said to have caused an action him- or herself.⁶ In order to appreciate the metaphysical problem this assumption raises it will be helpful to briefly review Galen Strawson's Basic Argument, succinctly representing what we might call the *causa sui* dilemma of moral responsibility:

(1) Nothing can be *causa sui* – nothing can be the cause of itself. (2) In order to be morally responsible for one's actions one would have to be *causa sui*,

at least in certain crucial mental aspects. (3) Therefore nothing can be truly morally responsible.

(G. Strawson, 1994, p. 5)

While this is clearly a stripped-down version of a more fully developed argument – which we will have cause to revisit – I believe that it is sufficient at least for indicating the important connection between self-causation and moral responsibility and for highlighting the gravity of the problem that this connection gives rise to. In order to defend a substantial version of moral responsibility one would need to offer a convincing way of explaining how something can be *causa sui*. Unless this explanation is to appeal to supernatural forces – a move that tends to suspend a scientifically coherent understanding of the world – it must provide a rational explanation for human exceptionalism. We will return briefly to the problem of human exceptionalism later, but before we do this it is called for to outline the relation between autonomy and self-determination. This is important because self-determination is frequently understood to be a prerequisite for autonomy. The question is, however, whether self-determination must always entail being *causa sui*?

Autonomy, self-determination and self-understanding

As already indicated in relation to Aristotle, autonomy may certainly be understood as something above or beyond the ability to make choices that are truly one's own. That is, 'autonomy does not just involve the choice of a way of living, but of one that is, in some sense, in balance' (Winch, 2006, p. 146). In attempting to open up for an understanding of autonomy that avoids the inherent difficulties with self-causation (in the sense of being *causa sui*), it may prove useful to investigate the aspect of autonomy that relates to the ancient notion of *a well-balanced life* and to look closer at the relation between this and the educational promotion of self-examination and self-understanding.

For Aristotle, being a naturalist of sorts, moral autonomy is not contrary to nature. In other words, it does not constitute a break with the regularities of the natural world. Nevertheless, Aristotle does propose a capacity to act in a morally responsible way, indicating a strong sense of autonomy and some degree of self-determination:

For where it is in our power to act it is also in our power not to act, and *vice versa*; so that, if to act, where this is noble, is in our power, not to act, which will be base, will also be in our power, and if not to act, where this is noble, is in our power, to act, which will be base, will also be in our power.

(Aristotle, 1984, p. 1758/NE, 1113b)

The question this quote raises is what it means for someone to have power to act for good or bad. Where does this power come from? We have already seen one version of the answer to this question provided by the Kantian tradition.

In this version the power to act morally comes from the noumenal self which is necessarily unaffected by the empirical world, explaining how it can intervene from the outside (although not necessarily how it can be influenced by education). Aristotle's answer is very different from this. Aristotle's understanding of autonomy is compatible with natural causation insofar as the ability to act morally is taken to follow naturally from a well-developed character. On Ravven's view, the upshot of this is that 'once character is set, people cannot do otherwise than they do' and it follows from the fact that 'human beings act necessarily according to their character and that natural (including mental) processes operate by necessity' (2013, p. 169).

As we have seen, there are accounts of education for autonomy that do not explicitly endorse an unconstrained version of free will (or a Kantian understanding of freedom for that matter) but that do acknowledge the limits of natural causation for human decision-making and moral development. John White makes for a good example of a philosopher of education who downplays the importance of choice-making and who is sensitive to the contextual nature of human autonomy (without committing to causal determinism). Since focusing single-handedly on promoting children's ability to make choices risks conflating becoming autonomous with the striving to satisfy arbitrary personal preferences, White argues that a flourishing life requires an educated understanding of what it is to flourish. White writes: 'The individual on his or her own is not the final authority on what counts as his or her flourishing. There is a centuries-long continuous tradition of thought about this topic to guide us' (2002, p. 452). The problem, of course, is that it is difficult, if not impossible, to establish an objective list of the things that will lead to flourishing for all (rather than simply reflecting the equally arbitrary preferences of the authors of the list). White counters this problem by proposing the importance of having children and students come to form a good understanding of their own preferences and he understands the task of education to be to provide 'them with whatever acquaintance is necessary with a wide range of possible intrinsic goods from which to make informed choices' (p. 445). This opens up some room for an understanding of self-determination that can potentially circumscribe the obstacle of the *causa sui* dilemma. One way of unpacking this understanding, and at the same time avoid hinging autonomy on choice-making, is by way of the Spinozistic notion of *self-understanding*. From a Spinozistic perspective, self-understanding is related to autonomy, not via origination and self-causation, but via the link Spinoza forges between gradual self-determination and the improvement of the understanding.

In order to substantiate the assumption that Spinoza's naturalistic conception of autonomy as self-understanding is worth investigating further in the context of education, it is called for to first expand on the connection between autonomy as an educational aim and free will; a connection that I have made several times already, but perhaps not provided sufficient proof or arguments for. While the debate concerning autonomy in education seldom appears to revolve around the free will problem expressly, it is – via the importance placed on human decision-making – a constantly looming presence in the background of most available

accounts. It may seem reasonable to assume that the dominant position on the free will problem is some version of compatibilism simply because the discussion on autonomy in education typically departs from compatibilist accounts like Frankfurt's or Dworkin's, or ones similar to these. For example, in a recent discussion on education for autonomy Rebecca Taylor (2017) describes the internal conditions for autonomy in a way that establishes that 1) personal autonomy is to be understood as a capacity, and 2) that this capacity relies on the agent's endorsement (voluntariness) and critical reflections for its efficacy. This clearly indicates the legacy of a compatibilist conception of autonomy for educational theory.⁷ At the same time, I have argued that the emphasis placed on decision-making – however construed – brings what I have, via Nagel, called an ordinary conception of autonomy to mind. The ordinary conception of autonomy, in turn, is predicated by self-causation in that the acting agent is referred to as the final explanation of the mental event in question.

Developing this line of thought I would like to turn to the basis of what is commonly known as 'the folk psychology of free will' (Caruso, 2012) in order to argue that the supposed determinism of most compatibilist accounts is severely hampered by being grounded in what still amounts to an essentially libertarian notion of free will. If this is so, then educational accounts relying – tacitly or expressly – on a compatibilist understanding of free will, at bottom, need to refer to a libertarian version of the will in order to avoid the threat of determinism as outlined in van Inwagen's Consequence Argument (see Chapter 1).⁸

As we saw in the previous chapter, compatibilism – in its different versions – typically assumes that causal determinism and free will are not at odds because freedom means nothing more than voluntariness. That is, to act freely means that we identify or choose to act in accordance with our will, even if our will in turn is subject to causes beyond our control. For the will to be free, on this account, means that it is supported by desires that are our own and *not* that it is uncaused. On this account we might say that an action is free in the sense that it results from an agent's desires and rational reflections and at the same time determined in the sense that these desires are themselves subject to external causes. This amounts to different conceptions of freedom, where a compatibilist might argue that the freedom we are and should be concerned with relates to voluntariness and identification (and justification), and the determinist or libertarian that the freedom we are and should be concerned with is to do with being the author of one's actions. The question, then, is which notion of freedom makes for the basis of the folk psychology of free will, thereby underpinning the ordinary language of moral responsibility? This becomes important insofar as the ordinary language of moral responsibility informs our understanding of the potential of education for autonomy.

Gregg Caruso (2012) turns to recent empirical studies in social psychology in order to illustrate that folk-psychological intuitions typically rest on a libertarian and incompatibilist notion of the will where having free will and being morally responsible entails being able to do otherwise (contra Frankfurt's argument against alternate possibilities as outlined in the previous chapter). Referring

to empirical studies (Nichols, 2004; 2006; Monterosso, Royzman & Schwartz, 2005; Sarkissian et al., 2010) that find that the pretheoretical assumptions of children and other subjects support agent-causal theories where freedom of will is taken to correspond with the ability to do otherwise, Caruso concludes that folk psychology relies on an incompatibilist understanding of the will. Further, he asserts that '[i]f ordinary folk are pretheoretical incompatibilists who believe in indeterminist free will, then compatibilists are no longer justified in affirming that their theory elucidates our *ordinary* conception of freedom and its cognates' (2012, p. 72, emphasis in original).

This illustrates the powerful psychological hold of a libertarian understanding of free will, and because this understanding of the will is difficult to reconcile with determinism, Caruso argues that '[t]his reveals that the compatibilist claim, that according to folk psychology moral responsibility is *completely* compatible with determinism, is simply mistaken' (p. 69, emphasis in original). As Galen Strawson puts it, 'the roots of the incompatibilist intuition lie deep within the very reactive attitudes that are invoked in order to undercut it. The reactive attitudes enshrine the incompatibilist intuition' (2010, p. 75). This, then, provides a good reason for investigating Spinoza's understanding of autonomy further, as he claims that it is an autonomy that we necessarily strive for, but one that is just as causally determined as anything else in the world, and one that does not allow for moral responsibility in any ordinary sense.

Almost all roads to autonomy seems to run through self-causation, either tacitly or expressly. Typically – as we have seen – self-causation means introducing a break with natural causation, where certain things are assumed to have the seemingly inexplicable capacity to act as prime (or unmoved) movers in a universe otherwise governed by the immutable laws and regularities of nature. Typically, but not always. Spinoza, as indicated in the previous chapter, is one of the more prominent causal determinists (and incompatibilists) of the history of western philosophy. He is also a moral philosopher however. In fact, his moral philosophy hinges on self-determination, but his notion of self-determination is aligned with his naturalism and so it does not introduce a break with natural causation. Spinoza's understanding of autonomy (which includes a form of self-determination) is potentially helpful here as it offers a way around the restrictions bound up with the assumption that autonomy is conditioned by self-causation and bound up with choice-making.

For Spinoza, autonomy is related to causation insofar as everything in a mechanistic world is related to causation. Spinoza's understanding of causation entails that everything in nature is caused by something else, unless it is a substance in which case it is self-caused (E1a1). We have, as finite beings (modes of substance), the capacity to act as intermediary or efficient causes but we are not – and cannot be – fully self-caused. If this were so we would cease being modes of substance and would in fact be substances ourselves instead. On Spinoza's view there is therefore nothing exceptional – metaphysically speaking – about humans. Humans are finite beings or modes of substance much like everything else in this world. While we may be gradually more complex than most other things, there is no metaphysical gulf between humans and nature (Melamed, 2011).

To cause something, in Spinoza's view, is equivalent to understanding something fully (E1p3d by E1a4). When we understand things in the world fully, we are the cause of our thoughts. Since we, as humans, are finite beings caught up in extremely complex chains of causation with other finite beings, it is unclear how we would go about understanding something fully. This is so since understanding something fully would involve creating a full causal map of the thing we wish to understand. We simply do not have the cognitive ability to do this. We can, however, come to understand things to a degree. The more we understand them, the more we will be able to be the cause of our thoughts. The things we can understand are limited insofar as we have more access to some things than we do to others. Things that are external to us are less accessible since our thoughts of external things are a mixture of our ideas of them and how we are affected by these ideas. That is, what we get is an idea that partly reflects the object external to us and partly reflect ourselves, or perhaps better, it reflects our body such as it is affected by the external body (E2p16). The things that are more accessible to us are the ways that, and the instrument through which, we perceive the world. We therefore stand a relatively better chance of coming to understand ourselves than we do things that are external to us. External things help us do so insofar as they let us know things about ourselves. Self-understanding is therefore our best shot at autonomy insofar as our autonomy hinges on our ability to be at least partly causally responsible for our thoughts. The best way of increasing one's autonomy is therefore to educate oneself towards a better self-understanding.

Spinoza leads us to the conclusion that autonomy and self-determination are best reached through an increased self-understanding via a series of related points worth quoting: in E1D7 we learn that '[t]hat thing is called free which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, *and is determined to act by itself alone*' (emphasis added). In order to understand what Spinoza means by *acting* we need to look at E3p1 where we learn that '[o]ur mind does certain things [acts] and undergoes other things, viz. *insofar as it has adequate ideas, it necessarily does certain things*, and insofar as it has inadequate ideas, it necessarily undergoes other things' (emphasis added). We are only autonomous then insofar as we act, and we only act insofar as we have adequate ideas of things. Because we perceive the world from the limited perspective of our own bodies, it follows that '[t]he idea of any mode in which the human Body is affected by external bodies *must involve the nature of the human Body* and at the same time the nature of the external body' (E2p16, emphasis added). Further, because the information we gain about the external world is always intermingled with, and filtered through, ideas about our own experience of it, 'the ideas which we have of external bodies *indicate the condition of our own body more than the nature of the external bodies*' (E2p16c2, emphasis added). Consequently, the best chance we have of gaining adequate ideas – and in extension of increasing our autonomy *vis-à-vis* external causes – is by focusing on understanding how our body perceives and experiences the world around us. This is a gradual process where our autonomy always parallels the degree of adequate knowledge we attain.

Departing from the ordinary conception of autonomy

Spinoza's gradual understanding of autonomy obviously relates to the question of free will and his position on autonomy as self-understanding clearly upsets the often-assumed link between autonomy, choice-making and moral responsibility. As Pereboom notes, moral responsibility and choice-making are typically taken to be closely connected. He writes:

The view that responsibility for decisions is especially important is driven by the sense that responsibility is fundamentally a matter of control, a kind of control agents would have primarily over their decisions, in conjunction with the fact that decisions are causally prior to consequences of decisions.

(Pereboom, 2001, p. xxi)

Spinoza's understanding of autonomy as self-understanding introduces a radical break with our ordinary conception of autonomy, which, as we have seen previously, is typically assumed to relate to the agent's control over his or her decisions in one way or another. Insofar as these decisions are believed to give rise to various consequences, the issue of moral responsibility is closely related to the ordinary conception of autonomy. Not so on Spinoza's account however. Insofar as Spinoza may be labelled a kind of 'hard incompatibilist,'⁹ to use Pereboom's term, it becomes important to find out more about the kind of freedom Spinoza actually posits, how it differs from the kind of freedom involved in the folk psychology of free will, and how it may be conceived in terms of a valid educational ideal. If, as Pereboom assumes, '[o]ne can be a hard incompatibilist and consistently claim that we can aspire to the freedom from the control of the harmful passions that Spinoza prized' (p. xxiii), then we need to investigate this conception of freedom further. Accordingly, in the following chapter we will focus on unpacking Spinoza's denial of free will, his understanding of freedom as necessitated, and his curious assertion that free will is a false yet necessary and innate idea. Having done so, we can then return to the question of moral responsibility, looking at how moral responsibility and moral education are commonly conceived to be coextensive, and at how Spinoza's denial of moral responsibility would reflect on moral education.

Notes

- 1 Correspondingly, the relationship between teaching and freedom is frequently conceived as both intimate and foundational. For example, in his *Philosophy of the Teacher*, Nigel Tubbs writes: '[T]eachers are inextricably involved in the business of freedom. Every decision one makes as a teacher is in some way related to freedom, authority and power. Indeed, [...] teaching is the very stuff of freedom's own difficulties and ambiguities' (2005, p. 63). For Tubbs, the relationship between teaching and freedom is importantly connected with (and even subordinated to) the striving for freedom of the student. He continues by asserting that 'it is by taking the risks that freedom demands that teachers serve the emerging freedom of their

- students *by becoming students to themselves*, and doing so by *thinking philosophically*' (ibid., emphasis in original).
- 2 Accordingly, Frankfurt maintains that '[t]he decision determines what the person really wants by making the desire upon which he decides fully his own. To this extent the person, in making a decision by which he identifies with a desire, *constitutes himself*' (1987, p. 38, emphasis in original).
 - 3 On this note, Winch remarks that '[a]utonomy is a difficult topic to deal with in the philosophy of education because it straddles philosophical, educational and everyday discussion, and the variety of uses of the term "autonomy" is both systematically ambiguous and conceptually contested' (2006, p. 2).
 - 4 In Kantian terms, the noumenal self refers to the aspect of the self that remains untouched by the empirical world and that is therefore unaffected by natural causation.
 - 5 Sometimes transcendental freedom is referred to as *noumenal freedom* (see for example Bennett, 1984). In this book these two concepts are used interchangeably.
 - 6 As we saw in the previous chapter, the thesis that moral responsibility is predicated by freedom of action is famously disputed by Frankfurt (2013b), arguing that coercion does not preclude moral responsibility. Because the present discussion focuses on self-causation and because the standard interpretation of moral responsibility precludes coercion, however, it will not – for the purposes of this chapter – be necessary to explore this question further.
 - 7 Accordingly, Taylor writes: 'In order to exercise autonomy, the agent must, of course, possess the capacity for personal autonomy, which involves critically reflecting on and endorsing one's ends' (2017, p. 1328).
 - 8 Saul Smilansky makes a similar point in *Free Will and Illusion*, where he suggests that at a fundamental level compatibilist accounts of free will need to tacitly rely on libertarianism in order to be able to ground the agential control necessary for moral responsibility. Accordingly, while social institutions like criminal law tend to function on the basis of control compatibilist criteria, an underlying libertarian free will is typically assumed. He puts it like this: 'While being tacit libertarians, we inhabit the compatibilist "world"; hence are "quasi-compatibilists"' (2000, p. 196). Similarly, G. Strawson describes what he calls the pre-philosophical position of *natural compatibilism* as follows: 'Many people accept that they are, ultimately, entirely determined in all aspects of their character by their heredity and environment. But it follows from this that, whether the heredity-and-environment process that has shaped them is deterministic or not, they cannot themselves be truly or ultimately self-determining in any way. And yet they do not feel that their freedom is put in question by this – even though they naturally conceive of themselves as free in the ordinary, strong, true-responsibility-involving sense. To this extent they are natural compatibilists. This is a very common position' (2010, p. 91).
 - 9 Pereboom prefers hard incompatibilism to hard determinism when designating his own position as one where he denies moral responsibility traditionally conceived.

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3 Spinoza on self-determination and the improvement of the understanding

Spinoza's ethical theory suggests that it is good to strive for self-determination (Kisner, 2011, pp. 87–111).¹ Self-determination, for Spinoza, amounts to improving one's understanding of natural causation. When we understand the causes that move us to act, we gain in freedom and we become more self-determined, relatively speaking.² Being self-determined means understanding more about what is good for us to strive for and understanding the natural limitations of our capacity to act. It does not mean that we suddenly become capable of causing ourselves. This, for Spinoza, would be a contradiction in terms. Because we are defined by the fact that we are caused by antecedent causes (E1D5), becoming self-caused would mean that we become something other than what we are. To become something other than what we are is, on Spinoza's account, as impossible as that something should come from nothing (E4p20s). Hence, it would make little sense to strive for something that is, for all intents and purposes, impossible to achieve.

Coming to see how these different aspects fit together requires a more systematic treatment of what Spinoza's determinism entails, how his determinism constrains the ethical striving for knowledge, and how Spinoza can posit a moral theory within a thoroughly naturalistic framework that precludes freedom of the will.

Spinoza's causal determinism

As we saw in Chapter 1, self-causation, for Spinoza, is reserved for God (E1D3). Spinoza's is a kind of self-causation that differs in some key regards from the standard interpretation of *causa sui* as described in the beginning of Chapter 1, however. For something to be self-caused for Spinoza does not mean that it may somehow contradict the law-like regularities of nature. It simply means that it encompasses the full causal explanation necessary for understanding and explaining why it is determined to act the way it does. God, Spinoza asserts, 'acts from the laws of his nature alone, and is compelled by no one' (E1p17). Because Spinoza's God is equivalent to Nature as substance (the immanent cause of all things), the laws of God's nature are the same as the law-like regularities of nature.³ To act freely, then, is to act from the necessity of one's own nature. It is

not to act contrary to one's nature as this would violate Spinoza's definition of freedom as that 'which exists from the necessity of its nature alone, and is determined to act by itself alone' (E1D7). The only thing that qualifies for this kind of freedom is God (E1p17c2). Everything else, whether human or otherwise, is causally determined and that 'which has been determined by God to produce an effect, cannot render itself undetermined' (E1p27). Spinoza's metaphysics allows for no exceptions here. Accordingly: 'In nature there is nothing contingent, but all things have been determined from the necessity of the divine nature to exist and produce an effect in a certain way' (E1p29).⁴ This means that singular things in nature 'can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined to exist and produce an effect by another cause [. . .] and so on, to infinity' (E1p28). Self-causation, then, is out of the picture for humans. For someone to be the cause of him- or herself would mean acting contrary to the regularities of nature. With regards to this Spinoza concludes: 'It is impossible that a man should not be a part of Nature, and that he should be able to undergo no changes except those which can be understood through his nature alone, and of which he is the adequate cause' (E4p4). As humans we are part of nature and being part of nature means being dependent upon antecedent causes for our existence.

The will, for Spinoza, is just another thing in nature. It is a mode of thinking, and as such it is determined by other modes of thinking. Therefore, 'each volition can neither exist nor be determined to produce an effect unless it is determined by another cause' (E1p32d). It follows from this that '[t]he will cannot be called a free cause, but only a necessary one' (E1p32). Not even God is attributed with freedom of the will:

For the will, like all other things, requires a cause by which it is determined to exist and produce an effect in a certain way. And although from a given will, *or* intellect infinitely many things may follow, God still cannot be said, on that account, to act from freedom of the will, any more than he can be said to act from freedom of motion and rest on account of those things that follow from motion and rest (for infinitely many things also follow from motion and rest). So will does not pertain to God's nature any more than do the other natural things, but is related to him in the same way as motion and rest, and all the other things which, as we have shown, follow from the necessity of the divine nature and are determined by it to exist and produce an effect in a certain way.

(E1p32c2)

As Yitzhak Melamed points out, it is clear from the quoted corollary that 'the will, whether it is a finite or infinite mode, must follow necessarily from its *causes* (and *not* from the will's "nature alone")' (2017, p. 124, emphasis in original). With respect to finite minds, Spinoza contends that 'there is no volition, or affirmation and negation, except that which the idea involves insofar as it is an idea' (E2p49).⁵ This means that there is no special faculty of willing for Spinoza, but

only singular volitions whereby the mind ‘affirms or denies something as true or false’ (E2p48s). Understanding the will in this sense is a radical departure from the traditional understanding of the will as ‘the desire by which the mind wants a thing or avoids it’ (E2p48s). From this, Spinoza concludes somewhat surprisingly that ‘[t]he will and the intellect are one and the same’ (E2p49c) insofar as ‘[t]he will and the intellect are nothing apart from singular volitions and ideas themselves’ (E2p49d).

To will something is simply to affirm a representational content of an idea. It follows that to experience affects such as love or desire is always an affirmation of the effect on the body and mind of the idea of a thing loved or desired (E2a3). Ideas, like bodies, naturally strive to persist in being by virtue of Spinoza’s *conatus* doctrine. In E3p6 Spinoza establishes that ‘[e]ach thing, as far as it can by its own power, strives to persevere in its being.’ This is the defining feature of all finite things. As Eugene Marshall points out, it follows from this doctrine that ‘ideas, when left to their own devices, will also continue to exist; for an idea, this means it will continue to assert or affirm its content’ (2013, p. 79). For example, the act of willing a cold drink of water on a hot day should therefore not be understood as an uncaused or spontaneous choice, but in terms of an instantiation of the desire to persevere in being conditioned by the particular circumstances of a very hot day. We will not stop affirming the idea of the effects of water simply because we drink some water. Spinoza’s parallelism precludes this kind of interaction between ideas and bodies (E2p7). Rather, it is only when the idea of the effects of the water is being countered by another, more powerful idea, that we will stop affirming it. We are moved to act not by a special faculty but by ordinary affects that can influence us in a positive or negative direction. That is, ideas enable us to affirm things as either helpful or as harmful for our striving to persevere in existence. When we recognise something as being helpful, we are automatically affected in a positive way, being empowered by this affective transformation. When we recognise something as being harmful, in contrast, we are disempowered and affected negatively (E3p11). Our lives are determined by affective struggles, where we are pulled in different directions by our mental capacity to affirm things as either helpful or as harmful. Marshall explains:

In short, human action results from an affect, with no subsequent volition or intention formation being necessary. When more than one possible action is under consideration, the strongest affect causes us to act, even when the strongest is irrational and runs contrary to our knowledge of our good.

(Marshall, 2010, p. 52)

The push and pull of affects, the affirmation and negation of ideas, all of these things are causal phenomena for Spinoza. That is, he sees no need to invent a parallel system of explanations when dealing with the mind. Ideas cause other ideas, just like bodies cause other bodies (E3pref).

Michael Della Rocca (2008) explains Spinoza’s commitment to causal determinism by way of his commitment to the Principle of Sufficient Reason. The

Principle of Sufficient Reason states that each thing is explainable in principle and in Spinoza's case this entails that 'to conceive of a thing is to explain it' (p. 5). Della Rocca argues that Spinoza's commitment to this principle leads him to accept determinism:

[I]f, given the past, more than one future is nonetheless open and there is more than one possible course for events to take, then whatever course of events actually comes to be would seem to be a brute fact; there would be no way, as it were, to see this particular future coming, there would be no reason in the past that suffices for this particular future.

(p. 75)

Indeterminism, from this standpoint, hinges on inexplicability and this obviously contradicts Spinoza's bold naturalistic claim that 'to be is to be intelligible' (p. 9), and that intelligibility is pervasive in the sense that all things must be explainable according to the same rules and principles. This allows us to see the central importance of explicability for Spinoza. To understand something – i.e. to come to see how something is related to, and follows from, antecedent causes – is to appreciate the natural order of things, and to see how each thing is bound up with other things in an infinite chain of causal events. This, for Spinoza, is an ethical enterprise as he takes a good life to be a life informed by a sound understanding of natural causation. Here we begin to see Spinoza's tight connection between epistemology and ethics (framed within his naturalistic metaphysical system). It remains to be seen, however, what it means more specifically to say that the improvement of the understanding is an ethical concern.

Spinoza on the ethical striving for knowledge

In order to substantiate the claim that striving for knowledge is an ethical concern for Spinoza we might return to the notion that volitions are affirmations. Let us return briefly to the aforementioned example concerning the act of willing a cold drink of water on a hot day. As indicated, this hinges on the notion that what motivates us as finite beings, is the striving to persevere in being. The particular act of willing a drink of water, then, is just an instantiation of this fundamental desire. If nothing stands in the way of our belief that drinking water will benefit us, we will tend to drink some water. This act, then, follows from our belief that drinking water will aid us in our striving to persevere. As Spinoza states in E3p28: 'We strive to further the occurrence of whatever we imagine will lead to Joy, and to avert or destroy whatever we imagine is contrary to it, *or* will lead to Sadness.'

Joy, for Spinoza, denotes an affective change whereby we gain in our power of acting (E3DOA 2). Sadness, in contrast, is an affective change whereby our power of acting is diminished or hampered (E3DOA 3). We always strive to empower ourselves – as this is conducive to our striving to persevere in being – but we often lack the knowledge necessary to determine, with some precision, what will in fact result in an increase in our power of acting. As we saw in the previous chapter,

our power of acting is tantamount to the degree to which we understand something adequately, i.e. to the degree that we perceive the causal chains behind the changes we go through and thereby, to a greater extent, become the adequate cause of these changes (E3D2). The changes we go through are always affective (E3D3). Insofar as we perceive these changes clearly, we are active and insofar as we do not we are acted upon and therefore passive. Hence, ‘the Mind is more liable to passions the more it has inadequate ideas, and conversely, is more active the more it has adequate ideas’ (E3p1c). We stand a better chance of securing things that will bring us joy – that are good for us – when we understand clearly what to strive for, and we risk ending up sad and disempowered to the extent that we mistake things that are bad for us for things that we believed wrongly to be good for us.

To go back to the example of drinking water, it may be that in addition to the idea that it is good for us to drink water when we are thirsty, we have another idea that the water before us is, in fact, poisoned. Depending on how clearly we perceive either of these conflicting ideas one of them will be stronger and will be the one to push us to act. In order to ensure our passage to greater joy we need reliable knowledge about which of the two acts will be most beneficial in the long run. It is not that we make a spontaneous decision, but that depending on our level of understanding, one of the ideas will be more powerful than the other and a more powerful idea – much like a more powerful body – will always move a weaker one according to the pervasive regularities of nature.

This helps us establish two important things. First, we can establish that in order to live ethically, for Spinoza, we need a reliable understanding of what benefits us and what does not. This knowledge can help us determine with a greater degree of precision what is good and what is bad. Second, and following from this, we see that what is ethical, in Spinoza’s view, is not reserved for what may be described as traditionally moral concerns. Virtue, for Spinoza, is synonymous with power (E4D8), because what is good is simply what amounts to an increase in our power of acting (our ability to perceive things more clearly⁶). Accordingly, as Matthew Kisner points out, Spinoza’s understanding of virtue ‘lacks any peculiarly moral sense: anything good for us, even obviously amoral activities such as eating or drinking, contributes to our virtue’ (2011, p. 81). Moral values are not intrinsic values for Spinoza, they are modes of thinking that are motivated by our egoistic psychological constitution and our striving to persevere in being (LeBuffe, 2014). To put it simply: the more knowledge we have, the more ethical we will become. As I have argued elsewhere (Dahlbeck, 2016), education is therefore a fundamentally ethical enterprise insofar as education is geared for increasing our understanding of the natural world and of ourselves as part of the natural world.

As outlined in the previous chapter, the thing we stand to know more adequately is our own body. Because ideas always represent bodily states and transitions (by virtue of Spinoza’s parallelism established in E2p7), we have a privileged access to the way we are affected by things in the world. As Michael LeBuffe (2010) has argued convincingly, however, this information is sometimes unreliable because

we also tend to confuse things that would be conducive to joy in one situation for things that are, in fact, detrimental for us in another situation.⁷ In brief, LeBuffe offers the example of the optimistic nutritionist to illustrate how the natural connection between joy/sweetness and perseverance/nutrition can cause us to desire things that are bad unbeknownst to us. By associating sweet things with nutritious things (fruits and nuts are both naturally sweet and nutritious) we may desire all kinds of sweets in the mistaken belief that they are nutritious when they are in fact not. The optimistic nutritionist, then, becomes an analogy for explaining the importance of distinguishing between sweet things that will lead to sustainable joy (such as nuts and fruits) and sweet things that will only lead to short-term joy and long-term sadness (such as candy). This is a matter of cognitively rewiring ourselves by coming to understand the particularity of our constitution and conditioning ourselves to associate only the nutritious *and* sweet with perseverance and lasting joy.

LeBuffe's optimistic nutritionist would be an example of how our understanding of how we are affected by different things can help us see what is conducive to joy and what is not, thereby strengthening the ideas that lead to joy (through our understanding them better) and weakening the ones that hamper us. Again, it is not a matter of becoming better or more proficient at making autonomous choices by virtue of a unique faculty of willing, but of taking advantage of our natural striving for understanding the causes that move us in order to further our fundamental striving to persevere in being. There is no sense in which we will ever be able to free ourselves from the passions (as being passive is what defines us *qua* finite beings),⁸ but by increasing our understanding of the ideas that move us to believe something, we might weaken some of the most detrimental passive affects. By doing so we would become relatively more self-determined than would otherwise be the case. Having substantiated the connection between the general striving for knowledge and the ethical striving for a good life we may now return to Spinoza's determinism and his denial of free will.

Causal determinism and the false belief in freedom of the will

I share Della Rocca's conclusion that given Spinoza's position on the will as a mode of thought, it is reasonable to assume that 'to separate the will from the intellect is to violate the explanatory self-sufficiency of thought' (2003, p. 221).⁹ Inasmuch as modes of thought are caused by other modes of thought, it follows that the will is another thing determined by antecedent causes. But if the will is not free in any metaphysical sense, why, then, has the idea of free will proven so pervasive? How can we explain the powerful hold of what Caruso (2012) and others call 'the folk psychology of free will'? Answering these questions requires more than just explaining how a false belief can be powerful enough to win out over reason however. In the context of Spinoza's philosophy, it requires an answer to the question of how there can be false beliefs to begin with (Tóth, 2016). In order to see how this is so we need to return briefly to

the notion that individual ideas (modes of thought) are caused by, and inhere in, God or Nature, and we need to investigate how this relates to the status of false beliefs.

The philosophical problem at stake here concerns how an idea can at the same time be adequate – insofar as it inheres in God or Nature – and inadequate – insofar as it is an idea of a finite mind. In E2p32 Spinoza asserts that ‘[a]ll ideas, insofar as they are related to God, are true.’¹⁰ Since God *qua* substance is all-encompassing, and the imminent cause of all ideas, it follows that all ideas are adequate insofar as they are related to substance. At the same time, Spinoza claims that ‘[t]he ideas of the affections of the human body, insofar as they are related only to the human mind, are not clear and distinct, but confused.’ The result is perplexing since it appears to follow from Spinoza’s philosophy of mind that an idea can at the same time be adequate *and* inadequate depending on if we take it to be an idea that is in God (substance) or in the human mind (a finite mode of substance). Ideas that are related to God are adequate insofar as they are thoroughly explainable. They are explainable because God has access to their full causal history (given that God is the adequate cause of all finite things). Ideas of a finite mind on the other hand may be inadequate insofar as the human mind lacks the causal history necessary for explaining them in full.

Falsity, for Spinoza, ‘consists in the privation of knowledge which inadequate, *or* mutilated and confused, ideas involve’ (E2p35). Falsity results from someone lacking the knowledge necessary to see how something has come about, and for explaining it sufficiently. In the scholium to E2p35, Spinoza gives the example of free will as a false belief:

[M]en are deceived in that they think themselves free [NS: i.e., they think that, of their own free will, they can either do a thing or forbear doing it], an opinion which consists only in this, that they are conscious of their actions and ignorant of the causes by which they are determined. This, then, is their idea of freedom – that they do not know any cause of their actions. They say, of course, that human actions depend on the will, but these are only words for which they have no idea.

(E2p35s)

Famously, Spinoza follows this example with another one concerning our ordinary perception of the sun as being much closer to us (as well as smaller) than it really is. When we form an idea of the sun, we might rely on a scientific explanation telling us how far from us it really is. At the same time, however, we will still experience it as being much closer insofar as it affects our body. Spinoza suggests that ‘we imagine the sun so near not because we do not know its true distance, but because an affection of our body involves the essence of the sun insofar as our body is affected by the sun’ (E2p35s). Because all ideas are representations of our own body being affected by external things, rather than true representations of external things in themselves, we tend to confuse information about our own body with information about the external object.

As Tóth points out, one way of interpreting this is to say that ‘the affirmation of the subject is not erroneous, rather the problem is with the fact that the subject identifies the object of his affirmation with the external object’ (2016, p. 85). The reason why there can be false beliefs in finite minds, then, is because finite minds tend to set up erroneous relations between ideas and external objects. Ideas are not false in themselves, that is they are adequate in God, but they give rise to confusion insofar as beliefs about external bodies and beliefs about the affected body get mixed up by finite minds. Accordingly, ‘my belief that the sun is 200 feet away and my belief that the sun is 600 Earth diameter away are not the same belief differently interpreted, they are different beliefs of the same object’ (Tóth, 2016, p. 88). Tóth thereby offers what to my mind appears to be a tenable solution to the problem of how an idea can at the same time be adequate in God and inadequate in a finite mind. The answer is that ideas are always adequate in relation to what they represent, but can give rise to false beliefs when they are taken to represent something that they do not, and cannot, adequately represent. In sum, falsity arises when we end up with two parallel beliefs about the same object, one that is more adequate in relation to the external object and one that is more adequate in relation to the experiencing body. If the idea that reflects the experiencing body more than the external object is taken to be a true representation of the external object, however, it becomes a false belief. I find this solution plausible and it manages, I think, to explain false beliefs without contradicting the Spinozistic assumption that all ideas are adequate in God.

In the scholium to E2p47, Spinoza addresses this issue in relation to most people’s confused understanding of God as a providential and personal God. He argues that the reason for this confusion is that ‘they cannot imagine God, as they can bodies, and that they have joined the name *God* to the images of things which they are used to seeing.’ Because of a privation of knowledge (an inadequate understanding of God), an erroneous relation is set up between ideas so that a word is applied to something that it cannot adequately represent. What we end up with are false beliefs. Spinoza continues with a different example:

And indeed, most errors consist in only in our not rightly applying names to things. For when someone says that the lines which are drawn from the center of a circle to its circumference are unequal, he surely understands (then at least) by a circle something different from what Mathematicians understand.

Singling in on the belief in free will, we can apply the same line of reasoning. On a metaphysical level, freedom of will is nonsensical for Spinoza because it contradicts the fundamentally deterministic and necessitarian nature of the world.¹¹ On a psychological level, however, free will is a powerful idea that makes for a central part of the human experience of being and acting in the world. What makes it powerful is the fact that we experience our desires to do different things, but we lack the full causal explanation for why we desire to do various things. That is, we have an idea of the affective transition we undergo when we encounter external objects, but we tend to project this idea onto the external object. In fact, it tells

us very little about the external object but more about how it affects us. Taking our affections to represent states in the world, we end up believing that some things are uncaused simply because we cannot explain them sufficiently. Melamed summarises this well:

The explanatory gap between my limited knowledge of the reasons for my actions (or desires) and the complete knowledge of the causal trajectory that determines my actions creates, by necessity, the phenomenological experience of free volitions (i.e., volitions that are not necessitated).

(Melamed, 2017, p. 130)

Because this experience is constantly reinforced whenever we lack an explanation for our actions (which is most of the time), the idea of free will becomes very powerful. Melamed proposes that the belief in free will hinges on three distinct elements. The belief in free will arises because 1) we have volitions, and 2) we are aware of these volitions, yet 3) we are ignorant of the causes of our volitions. Free will, then, fills the gap between our awareness of our volitions and our lack of explanation for their causes. At bottom, then, the belief in free will comes down to a quite natural privation of knowledge. Illustrating this point in a letter, Spinoza gives a curious example:

Next, conceive now, if you will, that while the stone continues to move, it thinks, and knows that as far as it can, it strives to continue moving. Of course, since the stone is conscious only of its striving, and not at all indifferent, it will believe that it is very free, and that it perseveres in motion for no other cause than because it wills to.

(Ep. 58, p. 428)

On Spinoza's naturalistic account, the only difference between the stone and us – humans – is that we have more ideas than the stone because our bodies are more complex. Complex bodies are paralleled by complex minds because they are composed of many more interacting parts. Beyond this, the basic mechanism is the same. Simple minds strive to persevere in being just like complex minds (E3p6). While we certainly have many more desires than the stone (because we have more ideas), we tend to lack the necessary knowledge to causally explain them. Lacking this knowledge, we invent a faculty of willing that becomes a placeholder for an explanation without really explaining anything at all. Melamed raises the relevant question of why it is that, given that the basic mechanism is the same, we do not attribute free will to objects like stones. That is, if it all comes down to an explanatory gap that is not unique for humans but is the same for all finite modes, how come we tend to look for causal explanations for things we do not understand in nature when we would ascribe the same things to free will in relation to human behaviour?

Melamed proposes a plausible answer to this question, referring to Spinoza's doctrine of the imitation of affects, stating that: 'If we imagine a thing like us,

toward which we have had no affect, to be affected by some affect, we are thereby affected with a like affect' (E3p27). Because we do not imagine ourselves to be like stones, we will not tend to imagine the behaviour of a stone to be anything like our own behaviour. We do not attribute volition or desires to stones because we do not imagine ourselves to be anything like stones. Melamed suggests that '[t]his perception of ourselves as being totally unlike the rest of nature is part of our normal folk psychology and is deeply engrained in our minds' (2017, p. 136). The folk psychology of free will is therefore part of a greater narrative whereby humans tend to elevate themselves above the rest of the natural world, where the idea of free will – while it really is due to a privation of knowledge – becomes a psychological means for reinforcing an imagined substantial difference between finite modes. It becomes clear, then, that the belief in (a libertarian form of) free will fits into a bigger picture, where to refute free will is not a matter of correcting one mistaken belief but of altering a much more comprehensive understanding of the world. It is in this sense that free will may be taken to be an innate yet false belief.¹² Just like a scientific explanation of the true distance of the sun will not eradicate the experience that the sun is much closer than it really is, a deterministic explanation of the world will not automatically eradicate the psychological experience of having free will. This psychological experience, however, may be no more true or adequate in relation to external things than the sensation that the sun is much closer and smaller than it seems. In Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 we will examine the grounds for claiming that the idea of free will can be productively employed as a valuable fiction in education (rather than as a false belief). This involves acknowledging its inadequacy as a description of an aspect of nature while retaining it as a fiction in order to exploit its affective potency for educational purposes.

Spinoza on praise and blame

As we have seen, Spinoza does believe in some form of human autonomy, but only insofar as this refers to our capacity to be gradually responsible for causing our thoughts. Our ability to cause is, as mentioned before, equivalent to our capacity for understanding. When we understand something, we are responsible for causing the idea and when we do not, we are not responsible. When we misconstrue things, we tend to act contrary to reason, and this will sometimes lead us to commit acts that violate our moral codes, such as the code that we should not murder one another. While this is clearly an immoral act, and Spinoza would agree that it is (insofar as it is contrary to reason), it is not an act caused by the alleged perpetrator. It is an act determined by external causes and we know this because it is an act that results in self-harm on the part of the alleged perpetrator.

Harming others (when unthreatened) will typically result in exposing oneself to significant danger from others (who feel threatened in turn). Spinoza claims that self-harm is inimical to our essence, which is to strive to persevere in being (E3p7). Consequently, he draws the following conclusion: 'But that a man should, from the necessity of his own nature, strive not to exist, or to

be changed into another form, is as impossible as that something should come from nothing' (E4p20s). Insofar as to act in a morally irresponsible way results in self-harm, then, it cannot be said to spring from the person him- or herself, but must be the result of external causes. On an even more fundamental level, we cannot commit immoral acts freely simply because freedom contradicts immorality. If we take immoral acts to entail evil acts, and if we recall that evil is anything that will hinder us in our striving to persevere, then we see that we only ever do things that hinder our striving to persevere insofar as we have false beliefs that lead us to think that what is bad is really good for us. Recall LeBuffe's analogy of the optimistic nutritionist which tells us that we tend to mistake bad things for good things precisely because we truly believe them to be good. Again, it comes down to a privation of knowledge. When we lack knowledge, we tend to form false beliefs, and when we act on false beliefs we may commit immoral acts. The reason they are immoral however, is that we lack crucial information about them, and since we lack crucial information about them, we cannot be their cause (since causation implies explicability). Freedom therefore precludes evil which is why Spinoza explicitly denies moral responsibility in relation to immoral acts. Spinoza explains his way of reasoning in his *Political Treatise*:

For freedom is a virtue, *or* perfection. So whatever convicts man of weakness can't be related to his freedom. A man can't be called free on the grounds that he can *not* exist, or that he can *not* use reason; only insofar as he has the power to exist and have effects, according to the laws of human nature, can he be called free. So the more we consider a man to be free, the less we can say that he can fail to use reason and choose evils in preference to goods.

(*TP* II, 7/p. 510, emphasis in original)

For Spinoza, the vanishing of moral responsibility does not however need to entail the erosion of a moral order used to uphold rules and regulations aimed at constraining people's immoral behaviour. It is important, Spinoza argues, to distinguish between the act of placing blame and the enforcement of a moral order protecting rational people. Spinoza explains how this distinction follows from his naturalistic understanding of ethics in a letter:

A horse is excusable for being a horse and not a man, but he must still be a horse and not a man. Someone who is crazy because of a dog's bite is indeed to be excused; nevertheless, he is rightly suffocated. And finally, one who cannot govern his desires and restrain them by fear of the laws, although he too is to be excused because of his weakness, nevertheless, cannot enjoy peace of mind, and the knowledge and love of God. He necessarily perishes.
(Ep. 78, pp. 480–481)¹³

While free will is deemed a false belief by Spinoza, and while this false belief can certainly be utilised as a productive social fiction insofar as it helps us identify

behaviour as either immoral or moral, it is not something that can be explained by appealing to human exceptionalism. It is a psychological fact that governs the way we think in everyday life but it is not really the root of our autonomy. Our autonomy is rooted in our ability to be the cause of our ideas insofar as we understand them adequately. This does not result in an autonomy that makes us exempt from natural causation, but in a form of mental autonomy that can help us cope with our restrictions as finite beings and that can help us affirm rational responses and reject irrational responses. To strive for this kind of mental autonomy is an educational goal that requires focusing on understanding natural causation.

Gradual freedom from external causes: an educational ideal

From Spinoza's uncompromising causal determinism and his denial of free will and moral responsibility springs an unlikely educational ideal in the form of greater freedom from external causes. It is, as we have seen, not the absolute freedom of God (in the form of self-causation) but a gradual form of freedom from passive affects that comes naturally with a greater degree of knowledge about what causes us to act the way we do. As we have seen, false beliefs arise when we erroneously take ideas about our affective transition to reflect the nature of external objects. Lacking knowledge of the true causes of things, people tend to associate whatever affects they undergo for the moment with qualities of whatever object they have in front of them and ascribe values to these objects according to the sensation they evoke. Nature is typically explained, Spinoza suggests, with reference to the imagination rather than with reference to an adequate understanding of natural causation. This, in turn, gives rise to various deep-seated prejudices. He illustrates:

For example, if the motion the nerves receive from objects presented through the eyes is conducive to health, the objects by which it is caused are called beautiful; those which cause a contrary motion are called ugly. Those which move the sense through the nose, they call pleasant-smelling or stinking; through the tongue, sweet or bitter, tasty or tasteless; through touch, hard or soft, rough or smooth, and the like; and finally, those which move the ears are said to produce noise, sound, or harmony.

(Elapp)

While these values are clearly subjective judgements, as they result from haphazard encounters with external bodies, they nevertheless tend to become universalised and are afforded the status of moral truths taken to reflect the true nature of things. This, then, gives rise to conflict whenever competing judgements are passed in relation to the same things. As we have seen, it is not that our ideas are false in themselves, but that they get erroneously related to objects that they

do not adequately represent. Since we experience the same things differently (because our bodies are differently constituted), but insist on ascribing the same values to the things we are affected by, we end up arguing over how to best label things in the world. Spinoza continues:

For although human bodies agree in many things, they still differ in very many. And for that reason what seems good to one, seems bad to another; what seems ordered to one, seems confused to another; what seems pleasing to one, seems displeasing to another, and so on.

(Elapp)

And, in conclusion:

We see, therefore, that all the notions by which ordinary people are accustomed to explain Nature are only modes of imagining, and do not indicate the nature of anything, only the constitution of the imagination.

(Elapp)

This gives us a good starting point for perceiving the problem as Spinoza perceives it. The problem is that human prejudices are projected onto the natural world as a way of compensating for an innate privation of knowledge. If we are to become relatively free of this problem, we need to take pains in understanding – as best we can – the natural world, not as we imagine it to be, but as it appears from what Nagel (1989) describes as the external standpoint. This is the only way we can become relatively liberated from the prejudices – such as the illusion of free will – that lead us into bondage. Much like with the sweet things that we believe to be nourishing, but that are in fact detrimental for us, prejudices like free will are assumed to lead to autonomy while in reality they keep us in bondage. The ticket out of bondage is to arrive at a more realistic understanding of ourselves as parts of nature rather than as a dominion within a dominion. As we saw in the previous chapter, the best shot we have at improving our understanding of natural causation in this sense is by gaining a better self-understanding. That is, if we come to understand how we are affected by external things, we can get a good understanding of how the attributes that express us (thought and extension) are constituted. Because attributes amount to our understanding of substance,¹⁴ this would allow us access to adequate ideas insofar as all ideas are adequate in God. If we can perceive this, we can understand an aspect of the world such as it truly is, thereby allowing us a vantage point from where to grasp the world, not via the imagination, but through the intellect.¹⁵ What to make of this in an educational context, however, remains to be seen.

What seems clear at this point is that insofar as education is broadly conceived as a process whereby people begin to form reliable ideas about the world, and insofar as an adequate understanding of the world – from Spinoza's viewpoint – results in a gradual freedom from external causes, then education may play an

important role for the development of autonomy. This is not, however, the kind of autonomy that relies on self-causation, but one that is hinged on the acceptance of the necessary constraints of natural causation. At this point, we can infer Spinoza's answer to P. F. Strawson's (2013) warning against allowing our metaphysical assumptions to interfere with our ordinary inter-personal attitudes (outlined in Chapter 1) in a way that coincides with what we might label Spinoza's educational ideal of self-understanding. While he would agree that these attitudes are no doubt deeply engrained in the human psychological constitution, he would not be so quick to endorse them as a kind of protective measure against the moral decay of the human social world. Instead, Spinoza connects them with a much broader tendency to project our imagination onto the external world, a condition that he argues leads to bondage rather than freedom. To gradually free ourselves of this narrow and prejudiced understanding of ourselves and the world is arguably the most central goal for Spinoza's ethical project.

To make matters more complicated, Spinoza seems to doubt our ability to arrive at an adequate understanding of the world. Sometimes, he argues, we need to make use of fictions to help keep us on the right track. While fictions are confused ideas, they are wilfully entertained (as opposed to false beliefs) and can be an effective means towards furthering our striving for self-preservation. In Chapter 5 we will return to this issue, looking at how the idea of free will may be conceived in terms of a valuable fiction, useful for circumscribing our innate privation of knowledge. This, however, requires that it is first robbed of its status as false belief, in which case it can only ever lead us into bondage.

This chapter leaves us with two important questions to be dealt with in the following two chapters. The first question (dealt with in the next chapter) concerns the relation between free will and moral education. Insofar as free will in education concerns moral formation and the development of personal autonomy, we need to investigate moral formation in an educational context more closely. This involves investigating the conceptions of free will that underpin influential accounts of moral education. While we began this undertaking briefly in the previous chapter, it is important to substantiate it so as to form a good understanding of how free will is taken to play into the moral formation of young people. In addition, it involves exploring if and how moral education can be reconciled with Spinoza's ethical theory, being severely constrained by his causal determinism. The second question (dealt with in Chapter 5) concerns the constraints placed on education by causal determinism in a more general sense. To the extent that causal determinism precludes self-causation we need to investigate in what sense we can speak of educational influence from a causal determinist point of view. More specifically, it calls for an investigation of the merits and challenges of an educational treatment of Spinoza's peculiar version of self-determination where the idea of free will is deemed metaphysically inadequate, but psychologically powerful and perhaps even pedagogically useful insofar as it is regarded as a valuable fiction.

Notes

- 1 Spinoza's understanding of good and evil is that '[i]nsofar as a thing agrees with our nature, it is necessarily good' (E4p31) and 'insofar as it is evil for us, it is contrary to us' (E4p30). Coming to understand what agrees with our nature involves understanding how we are caused by antecedent causes insofar as this allows us to determine whether something furthers our striving to persevere in being or not. Insofar as self-determination hinges on understanding natural causation, then, it is bound up with our understanding of, and striving for, the good.
- 2 As Manekin rightly observes, 'Spinoza does hold that humans can achieve a measure of freedom in a deterministic world, but Spinozistic freedom is not the same as compatibilist free will' (2014, p. 37). In the course of this chapter I aim to illustrate in what sense Spinoza's freedom differs from the compatibilist version.
- 3 In this sense, Spinoza's non-traditional understanding of God shares central traits with Avicenna's in that whereas '[t]he traditional interpretation views God as personal, voluntaristic, and supernatural, [. . .] Avicenna's God is an impersonal agent acting through an eternal unchanging will that unfolds an expression of the necessity of the divine nature' (Manekin, 2014, p. 42). Spinoza famously rejects a personal God and attributes this popular yet erroneous image to human confusion arising from cognitive limitations (E1app).
- 4 Spinoza is both a necessitarian – in holding that the way the world is, is necessary, and that nothing could be otherwise – and a determinist – in holding that every effect is determined by antecedent causes and conditions together with the law-like regularities of nature. For a historical treatment of Spinoza's relation to the determinist tradition of medieval Jewish philosophy see Manekin (2014). For a lucid treatment of Spinoza's necessitarianism, see Jarrett (2009).
- 5 For an informed discussion of how E2p49 (as well as its demonstration) constitutes a powerful critique of the Cartesian assumption that judgements or affirmations are *acts of pure will* that are separate from the ideas affirmed, see Della Rocca (2003).
- 6 In the preface to Part 5 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza establishes that 'the power of the Mind is defined only by understanding.' Because the mind is nothing above or beyond a collection of ideas that bring about unified effects, the power of the mind amounts to the power of the ideas that make up the mind.
- 7 This confusion hinges on Spinoza's doctrine of the imitation of affects. For a more detailed discussion of how the imitation of affects relates to the education of the imagination see Chapter 5 of my *Spinoza and Education* (Dahlbeck, 2016).
- 8 In the preface to Part 5 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza refutes the Stoic (and subsequently Cartesian) belief that passions may be dominated and controlled in full by the mind.
- 9 Della Rocca's (2003) main argument for his interpretation of Spinoza's position on the will hinges on Spinoza's attack on the Cartesian notion that body and mind interact. If, as Spinoza argues, the attribute of thought and the attribute of extension have nothing in common (but simply exist in parallel as attributes of substance) then it becomes difficult to argue for their causal interaction. The will cannot be anything other than an idea, then, as that would preclude its causal relations to other ideas.
- 10 Spinoza understands the relation between truth and adequacy as follows: 'Every idea which in us is absolute, *or* adequate and perfect, is true' (E2p34). For an idea to be true means that it corresponds in full with the object that it represents (as all ideas are representational for Spinoza [Della Rocca, 1996, pp. 44–49]). An adequate representation of an object is therefore the same as a true idea. Accordingly, 'all ideas which are in God agree entirely with their objects (by P7C), and so (by IA6) they are all true' (E2p32d).

- 11 Understanding free will to be an innate yet false belief has far-reaching consequences insofar as it means that we are naturally geared for misconceiving the world. As Galen Strawson notes: ‘But if naturally believing in freedom is an error, then it is an error about an entire dimension of experience. For if it is an error, then there is no free/unfree distinction to be drawn at all. We are not just wrong about some actions, we are wrong about them all’ (2010, p 70).
- 12 It is important to note that even though Spinoza considers free will to be an innate belief he does not espouse a commitment theory of freedom where we are free insofar as we believe we are free and also cannot help but believe that we are free. Spinoza’s theory of freedom is not a Subjectivist theory in this sense as it takes human freedom to be an objective, albeit gradual, process of self-determination from external causes. For a useful outline of the requirements of commitment theories of freedom, see G. Strawson (2010, pp. 52–54).
- 13 According to Curley (Spinoza, 2016, pp. 480–481), the suffocation mentioned in this letter is likely to refer to a method of euthanasia utilised on victims of rabies.
- 14 In E1D4 Spinoza defines attribute as follows: ‘By attribute I understand what the intellect perceives of a substance, as constituting its essence.’
- 15 An obvious problem with this is that it assumes that we can arrive at something at least approximating the external standpoint, while – as we will discuss in Chapter 5 – this may be an unattainable ideal.

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4 Moral education and moral responsibility

Education and moral formation

In educational theory, moral formation is commonly described as a central part – if not *the* most central part – of education. Teachers, besides being entrusted to teach their students various skills valuable for their coming careers and adult lives, are also entrusted to guide them along the path of moral formation. David Carr describes education along these lines:

[A] time-honoured way of thinking about education would regard schools and teachers as perhaps the principal agencies of moral formation in society – in a way that goes beyond mere accountability to current social trends or parental predilections. There are surely at least some circumstances in which we do or should want to say that (good) schools or teachers know better than others what is morally best for young people, and should not merely be pandering to dubious parental aspirations and ambitions – even if parents are footing the bill.

(Carr, 2003a, p. 73)

While the relation between moral formation and education is certainly debatable, it is quite clear that insofar as education is concerned with a striving for something more than survival (what we might call a good life) there is a sense in which moral formation makes for an undeniable aspect of education. On Carr's view, this aspect of education is much more essential to the concept of education than the mere teaching of skills, something that can be done in contexts that are not necessarily educational at all.

[F]ew occupations besides teaching (and ministry) are so clearly concerned with the actual formation of others in positive values and attitudes. In short, it is hard to deny that education involves improving people in a sense that extends beyond mere coaching or training in information and skills to wider *personal* formation.

(Carr, 2003a, p. 77, emphasis in original)

Michael Hand, in a recent book, suggests that ‘[m]oral education matters because each new generation must be taught the difference between right and wrong,’ and, consequently, he proposes that ‘[t]he crucial educational task is the formation of responsible moral agents’ (2018, pp. 5–6). The problem with this task is that it is often difficult to determine when moral education turns into indoctrination. One of the ways in which the threat of indoctrination may be dealt with is by focusing less on the instrumental transmission of moral values and more on the process of cultivating a moral character. In fact, this may be taken to account (at least partly) for the strong appeal of the ancient tradition of character education.¹ While character education has a long and rich tradition, it is also quite varied. In what follows, I will endeavour to offer a fair (but brief) description of this tradition, looking at what might be conceived as its most central features, at some of the decisive changes it has gone through and, more importantly, at how the notion of free will has come to play an important role for contemporary versions of character education. It is against this background that we will then investigate the currency of Spinoza’s naturalism in order to see whether it may offer an alternative route to moral formation without succumbing to the metaphysical pitfalls of free will.

Aims of character education: the cultivation of virtue

In recent years, character education and virtue ethics have undergone a form of renaissance in the philosophy of education (Sanderse, 2015). Virtue and character are Aristotelian notions that amount to key components of an ethical life according to Aristotle. The Aristotelian conception of the highest good to strive towards (in life as well as in education) is expressed through the notion of *eudaimonia*. *Eudaimonia* is commonly taken to denote a form of happiness in the sense of a life well lived or a flourishing life. The path leading up to *eudaimonia* is a path laid out along the virtues. In this sense ‘it is impossible to achieve *eudaimonia* without being morally good – without actualizing the moral virtues’ (Kristjánsson, 2007, p. 15). If we can become virtuous – that is, if we manage to live according to the virtues – we will become happy in the *eudaimonistic* sense. Accordingly, the premier aim of Aristotelian character education may be taken to be the cultivation of ethical virtues in children and students. What, then, is it to be virtuous more specifically?

Aristotle construes ethical virtues as intermediary states balancing between deficiency and excess. The art of living a well-balanced life is kept in check by the desire to strive for acting on virtues placed between two extreme poles, both of which are equally undesirable. For instance, the virtuous person will strive to always act generously, avoiding both the deficiency of greed (personified by the miser) and the excess of wastefulness (personified by the wasteful and careless person). To live guided by ethical virtues such as generosity is to live a flourishing life. To achieve this kind of life is an end in itself, which is why *eudaimonia* is conceived as the highest good to strive for. This means that *eudaimonia* is desirable

for itself and not for the purpose of attaining some other good and, correspondingly, that all other goods are desirable for the sake of *eudaimonia* (Kraut, 2014). This makes *eudaimonia* the ultimate end (*telos*) of human life, and to be able to strive for this kind of perfection is what distinguishes the human being from other forms of life naturally incapable of this kind of intellectual happiness.

Traits such as generosity, honesty and courage are instrumental for the realisation of a flourishing life, but in and of themselves they are merely parts of a greater machinery geared at ‘the formation of somebody’s character, which accommodates a whole range of virtues and in which cognition and emotion ideally form a unity’ (Sanderse, 2015, p. 383). This implies that the virtues are simply expressions of a kind of wisdom of life and that they may be understood in terms of ‘particular rational responses to the various temptations, trials and tribulations characteristic of human life’ (Carr, 1991, p. 33).

Carr suggests that ‘virtuous agents are those who respond at the right time, to the right objects, towards the right people, with the right motive and in the right way’ (2003b, p. 219). A person who does this has acquired a virtuous character. This, however, requires training, and so it would be fair to characterise Aristotelian character education as ‘a form of moral education focusing on the development of virtues’ (Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 2). The notion that a virtuous character hinges on the ability and determination to make sound moral choices (as is implicit in Carr’s previous claim) is central for many contemporary accounts of character education. As such, to be moral is to be able to make moral choices (i.e. to have moral agency), even when the moral choice is the most difficult and least readily available option. To be able to make moral choices, in turn, seems to require a capacity to choose freely.² At least this is what most people assume is what makes us morally responsible for our actions. If we did not have the ability to choose freely between a moral and an immoral way of responding to any given situation, it is difficult to see how we could be held morally responsible for our choices.

This leads us up to one of the most acute challenges of contemporary character education. It can be formulated in the form of the following question: how can we reconcile the fact that in order to act virtuously we appear to need to refer to the concept of a free will, while, at the same time, there are convincing philosophical arguments (aligned with a scientifically up-to-date understanding of natural causation) discrediting any viable notion of an unconstrained or uncaused will?

In what follows of this chapter we need to first substantiate the link between contemporary character education and the concept of free will so as to illustrate the interdependency between the two. This interdependency is informed by a broader overlap between the metaphysics of free will and central educational concerns.³ Having done so we may return to the validity of referring to free will in a contemporary educational context. This involves returning to the philosophical stakes (outlined in Chapter 1) involved in proposing a unique capacity to intervene with the causal order of nature. At this point we may turn again to Spinoza’s naturalistic conception of the will, looking at some of the practical consequences of grounding contemporary character education in a deterministic worldview where the will is thoroughly naturalised.

It warrants mentioning that the focus of this chapter is limited to discussing a western philosophical tradition of virtue ethics and its role in shaping the understanding of free will in contemporary character education. It should, however, be noted that there are indeed other virtue traditions with a long and rich history that offer different points of view on the question of free will and character formation. Two notable examples of such traditions are Confucianism and Buddhism. Both Confucianism and Buddhism represent broad (and varied) traditions of thought furthering theories of virtue as a point of departure for their ethics. From a Buddhist perspective, ‘a Mahayana meta-ethics supports those who argue for greater attention to perception, emotion, and imagination in programs of moral education, in contrast to the more usual exclusive emphasis upon will and deliberative reason’ (Vokey, 1999, p. 105).⁴ From a Confucian perspective, the goal of character education is primarily to make students consistent in their desires, not to have them practice decision-making. Accordingly, ‘the task of Confucian mind can be posed in terms of knowing as being aware, rather than choosing. Thus, we can say that learning in the Confucian sense is not concerned with deliberation for a choice, but with recognition’ (Kwak, 2016, p. 18). In many ways, this is aligned with ancient Greek traditions of self-cultivation insofar as it eschews the modern inclination towards deliberation of the will.⁵ In the context of moral education, this means that ‘the education that Confucius had in mind is primarily *moral* education, as his goal was to help his students to become virtuous persons’ (Huang, 2011, p. 141, emphasis in original).

While it is difficult to assess the impact of Confucian and Buddhist virtue ethics on western models of character education, it may be argued that what has been termed ‘the postsecular turn’ in contemporary education – describing ‘a turn towards integrating previously separated spheres of knowledge acquisition within new paradigm of secular-spiritual synergies’ (Wu and Wenning, 2016, p. 553) – coincides with a revival of eastern traditions of thought in education.⁶ This may be explained in part by the fact that these traditions of thought can open up for ‘a form of yearning, searching, and enlightened attitude about the shortcomings of both religion and secularity’ (p. 566). In this chapter, my aim is to trace the western conception of the free will in character education – from an Aristotelian understanding of moral agency to a Kantian notion of the free will – and to trouble this tradition from within, as it were. I will therefore contrast the dominant understanding of the free will, not with eastern traditions of wisdom, but with Spinoza’s rationalistic and naturalistic understanding of the will, a concept of the will that – as we have already seen – follows from his commitment to causal determinism.

Challenges of contemporary character education: the free will problem and the question of moral responsibility

Aristotle’s conception of moral agency and responsibility – as laid out in Book III of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (*NE*) – is not immediately recognisable as corresponding with the folk psychology of free will, signifying that we are free to do as we

choose. In fact, Aristotelian ethics have undergone a radical transformation so as to accommodate a version of the free will that was not prevalent in classical Greek philosophy. This transformation is generally attributed to Aquinas – and other Christian thinkers – who, in the thirteenth century, sought to reconcile Aristotelianism with a (largely Augustinian) concept of the will to which all vices could be causally related (Kent, 1995).⁷ Contemporary character education owes much to this transformation, and personal decision-making is central for many models of character education drawing (however loosely) on the Aristotelian cultivation of virtue (Ravven, 2013, pp. 1–55).⁸ This transformation may be summarised as moving from a naturalistic understanding of the will – where decisions follow naturally from the character of a person – to an understanding of the will as a capacity setting humans apart from the rest of nature (while bringing them closer to God) insofar as it grants them the ability to intervene with natural causation.

Despite the naturalistic elements of his understanding of the will, Aristotle is generally recognised as having offered the first theory of moral responsibility (Eshleman, 2014).⁹ To be free, on Aristotle's account, is to be the cause of one's actions. When we are the cause of our actions, we are morally responsible, and we can choose to act virtuously or not (*NE*, Book III, 1113b). To become morally responsible for one's actions, insofar as we acquire the power to act and the power not to act, is part of one's moral development. This requires understanding how we function and how we are constrained by things that are external to us. When we understand this clearly, we will be in a position to make moral choices, and we will be able to act virtuously. As Carr puts it, for Aristotle 'moral wisdom of knowledge is a knowledge of how to make right moral choices' (1991, p. 59). There is a sense, then, in which we might find the seed of a free will argument in Aristotle. What is important for Aristotle, however, is not whether we always make the right decisions or not. Good decision-making is merely the natural outcome of having developed a virtuous character. The main objective of moral education, from a classical Aristotelian point of view, is to have students cultivate a virtuous character, and they will cultivate their character by increasing their understanding of themselves and the world.

As indicated previously, however, many contemporary models of character education are less focused on the cultivation of a virtuous character (in the Aristotelian sense) and more focused on learning how to act. This action-oriented form of moral education is commonly taken to be informed by Kantian ethics, oriented around identifying patterns of acting that correspond with moral principles. Heidi Ravven notes that 'in the American context, the Aristotelian notion of personal character has been reshaped through the lens of free will,' in the sense that 'character educators use a (Kantian) model of choosing actions that accord with principles (or virtues) to which children have freely committed themselves, rather than a model that involves training behavior' (2013, p. 44). The focus on personal decision-making, Ravven claims, reveals the 'foundational nature of the free will perspective in America' (p. 51). It also shifts the focus from the formation of students' characters to the setting up of an educational framework of praise and blame. Moral choice, in this tradition, is not so much a matter of

acquiring a virtuous character as it is a matter of the individual orientation of the will in a natural world where we have the freedom to act for good or for evil.

What, then, is the problem with grounding character education in the assumption that humans have free will in this latter sense? This question may be approached from at least two, equally relevant, perspectives. It may be approached in terms of a philosophical problem, and it may be approached as an educational problem. From a philosophical point of view, the notion of a free will is problematic insofar as it relies on an understanding of human freedom where to be free is to be exempt from natural causation. That is, if freedom is understood in terms of freedom from constraint and the subsequent understanding of the will is understood as being uncaused or spontaneous, then we come up against the philosophical problem of having to explain how it is that humans have the ability to act contrary to laws or regularities that bind the rest of nature. As we have seen, from a Kantian perspective, for instance, being transcendently free means being unaffected by the constraints of natural causation. There are, however, conceptions of human freedom that do not introduce this kind of tension with a naturalistic understanding of the world, and so one way of coming to terms with this problem would be to appeal to a different concept of freedom.

From an educational point of view, the notion of a free will is problematic as it appears to render all aspects of moral education into matters of personal choice and, in extension, because it makes moral education almost exclusively concerned with the question of praise and blame. The most obvious problem with this, from an educational point of view, is that it risks rendering moral education into a paternalistic form of conditioning (primarily driven by the child's fear of being blamed)¹⁰ and 'as mere training as opposed to authentic education'¹¹ (Cuypers, 2009, p. 135). There is also a deeper underlying tension between free will and education in the sense that for a free will to be genuinely free, it needs to be uncaused and spontaneous, and for education to be effective, it needs to assume that actions and thoughts can be externally influenced (and wilfully manipulated). Johannes Giesinger frames the free will problem in terms of a pressing educational paradox:

It seems that what he [the learner] thinks, what he wants and how he acts can never be truly *his*, since it is brought about by education and other factors beyond his control. *On the other hand*, if we consider the learner as endowed with a free will, then it might seem impossible to educate him at all.

(Giesinger, 2010, p. 515, emphasis in original)

That is to say that 'if his [the learner's] present and future actions stem from a will that is genuinely free, then they will be independent from any educational influence' (ibid.). In order to escape this dilemma, Giesinger proposes 'a reason-based understanding of freedom' (p. 525) where 'a person is free if she acts on reasons she accepts as valid' (p. 520). This assumes a weaker concept of freedom (than the one given previously) in the sense that the learner's reasons 'are not (yet) part of his identity' but that through education 'those reasons that one is

prompted to accept become *one's own* in a strong sense' (p. 522, emphasis in original). Education, in this context, concerns the process by which 'the child's basic freedom can be cultivated to become full-blooded autonomy' rather than the process by which 'an unfree object can be transformed into an autonomous subject' (p. 525).

To act freely on this view is not simply to be able to make a choice, but to be able to make a choice *for the right reasons*. This conception of freedom relies on a compatibilist understanding of free will, favoured in hierarchical accounts of personal autonomy discussed in Chapter 2. Whereas everyday choices are frequently made out of habit or as direct results of one's social milieu, an autonomous moral choice is taken to be the end result of a deliberate educational process. As Cuypers puts it: 'For that reason, the "free man" not only is a free chooser but also possesses an authentic code of conduct in the light of which he chooses' (2009, p. 126). Being informed by R. S. Peters, Cuypers goes on to propose that 'a choice (or decision) is autonomous if and only if its agent both has control in making it and is authentic with respect to it' (ibid.). To be authentic with respect to one's choice, on Cuypers' account, means that one's choice is grounded in beliefs and desires that are, in some foundational sense, authentic rather than alien. That is, for a choice to be considered authentic, the moral agent needs to be its true cause. For a choice to be caused entirely by the moral agent, however, the moral agent would seem to need to be placed 'outside the realm of natural laws' (Giesinger, 2010, p. 517) insofar as things that abide by natural laws are always necessarily caught up in, and at least partially determined by, natural chains of causation.

The relevant educational concern related to the issue of authenticity is of course the problem of indoctrination. If a child is manipulated into holding certain values, in what sense can these values be labelled authentic? Cuypers offers the example of religious practices being habituated early on in the child's life as an illustration of this problem:

The child [. . .] may not be able to refrain from a certain religious practice – her relevant actions would express choices stemming from unsheddable, antecedent causal elements that are not truly the child's own – because of the way in which the religious training took place.

(2009, p. 127)

The problem with this explanation, of course, is that it is unclear how one distinguishes between the 'causal elements that are not truly the child's own' and those that are. For Kant, for instance, being morally autonomous means being unconditionally free: where genuine freedom is grounded in a transcendental and non-empirical realm, and where one's moral reasoning is therefore necessarily untouched by the phenomenal world of appearances.¹² As Giesinger (2012, p. 777) points out, however, this raises an educational issue insofar as it is not entirely clear if and how the noumenal self can be educated given that it is construed as being necessarily unaffected by external empirical influences. Assuming

that a person's character can in fact be molded through education, it appears difficult to draw any sharp line between inculcating moral values (that the child will come to be the true cause of over time) and manipulating the child into adopting someone else's values (that the child will never be the true cause of). This amounts to R. S. Peters' paradox of moral education (mentioned in Chapter 2) where the most pressing problem facing the educator concerns how to inculcate good habits 'in a way which does not stultify the development of a rational code or the mastery of the "language" of activities at a later stage' (2015a, p. 52). Peters' response to this paradox is to propose a distinction between habits that are mere automatised responses to external stimuli and habits that are, in Cuypers' words, '*rationally* permeated tendencies to act,' meaning that 'they have reasons behind them, and although they usually operate automatically, we are at liberty to stop them' (2009, pp. 128–129, emphasis in original). As Cuypers remarks, however, the question remains as to what the conditions of 'the initial instillment of these prerequisite elements of adequate moral habits' (underpinning our reasons for acting) are (p. 129)?

In response to this question Cuypers (and Haji and Cuypers, 2004) proposes a future-oriented and 'relational view of authenticity' where it is claimed that 'although pertinent psychological elements instilled in the child during the prenormative stage are not authentic per se, they can be authentic with an eye toward future moral responsibility' (Cuypers, 2009, p. 134). Going back to the core problem of where this authentic moral ability comes from, it remains difficult to explain the seemingly supernatural tendency underpinning the notion of the free will insofar as it is conceived in terms of an unexplainable self-caused thing in a world of otherwise externally caused things. This brings us back to the related problem of moral responsibility. As Cuypers goes on to argue, it becomes problematic to assign moral responsibility unless we can determine that a particular action *A* 'stems from psychological antecedents that are constituents of *S*'s [*S* = a normative agent] authentic evaluative scheme' (p. 135). Given that determining the causal origin of an action *A* as being within *S* appears to require circumscribing the regularities of natural causation, it is questionable whether a convincing account of moral responsibility will hold sway in the face of a naturalistic understanding of the world.

As we have seen, to be the cause of oneself (or at least of some of one's actions) is typically required for moral responsibility to make sense. If my behaviour is caused by something external to me, it is difficult to see how I can be held responsible for it. For someone to be the complete cause of his or her actions is, however, very difficult to conceive as this appears to require a kind of self-determination that natural things are not generally attributed with. This line of thinking is illustrated by Galen Strawson's Basic Argument (outlined in Chapter 2) stipulating that moral responsibility hinges on self-causation. There is an interesting tension between the fairly straightforward and simple claim that no one can be the complete cause of him- or herself (insofar as we are all to some extent products of our heredity and our upbringing) and that no one can therefore be the complete cause of his or her conduct, and the commonsensical

view that morality requires moral responsibility in precisely this sense. Carr, for instance, writes:

In fact I hold the common-sense view that most of us are for most of the time quite responsible (in the sense that, amongst other things, we could have chosen to do something other than what we actually did) for the wrong-doing we commit.

(1991, p. 17)

Without actually disputing the truth of the Basic Argument, Carr turns to a commonsense view so as not to undermine the central place of moral responsibility within western traditions of moral philosophy. The question is, however, if the question of praise and blame is as crucial as one might be led to believe that it is. In order to clarify, the point at stake is not whether we have the capacity to act so as to prevent bad things from happening but whether it makes sense (philosophically) to blame someone for not acting in a morally acceptable way. Carr puts it succinctly:

If ideas of this sort are taken completely serious then it may well be appropriate to constrain the individuals in question, to submit them to psychiatric treatment, to re-educate them out of the attitudes they have acquired in vicious environments or even to try to eradicate whatever might be understood to have caused the delinquent behaviour in those environments, but it is really not to the point to blame or hold agents responsible for actions concerning which they could not have known better.

(1991, p. 34)

On Galen Strawson's view, the question of moral responsibility turns out to be not so much an issue of what is true or false in a logical sense, but of the importance of *the experience of choice* as such.¹³ In order to illustrate, Strawson describes a scenario where a person is walking up the steps leading to a shop with the intention of buying a cake. When, at the door of the shop, this person is being intercepted by someone presenting the opportunity of investing the same money in charity instead, Strawson argues that the experience of having a choice is strong enough to make us disregard the logic of the Basic Argument telling us that we can never be truly morally responsible for our actions. He argues that '[l]arge and small, morally significant or morally neutral, such situations of choice occur regularly in human life' and that '[t]hey are the fundamental source of our inability to give up belief in true or ultimate moral responsibility' (1994, p. 10). Accordingly, 'they are the fundamental rock on which the belief in true moral responsibility is founded' (p. 11).

Returning to the context of contemporary character education, it is obvious that the tension between a strong belief in free will and moral responsibility and the strong logic of the Basic Argument remains largely unresolved. While it is difficult to conceive of children and students as being the true cause of themselves, it

appears to be equally hard to abandon the notion that children and students have free will and that they are (to some extent at least) morally responsible agents. It is a paradox that refuses to be settled because if one were to accept the Basic Argument, one would also need to accept the fact that '[i]t is exactly as just to punish or reward people for their actions as it is to punish or reward them for the (natural) colour of their hair or the (natural) shape of their faces' (p. 16). And this, it seems, is no easy thing to have to accept.

The force of the Basic Argument, on Strawson's account, is that it really doesn't hinge on whether we accept determinism or not. From the perspective of compatibilism – where determinism and free will are taken to be compatible – it may be argued that a person is considered responsible for an action as long as he or she is not constrained by alien influences such as acting under threat, under post-hypnosis suggestion, or being afflicted by mental illness, etc. At bottom, however, regardless of how we conceive of the particular circumstances surrounding our decision-making, the question remains as to how the compatibilist understanding of responsibility can assist in grounding actions in a person as its true cause. As Strawson concludes in response to the compatibilist position: 'One does what one does entirely because of the way one is, and one is in no way ultimately responsible for the way one is. So how can one be justly punished for anything one does?' (p. 17). From the perspective of incompatibilism – where the assumption is that free will exists and that therefore determinism is false – the question of moral responsibility is still not answered in a satisfactory sense. As Strawson asks: 'If my efforts of will shape my character in an admirable way, and in doing so are partly indeterministic in nature, while also being shaped [. . .] by my already existing character, why am I not merely lucky?' (p. 18). Strawson's conclusion is that the notion of moral responsibility cannot be sufficiently defended from either of the two perspectives:

In the end, whatever we do, we do it either as a result of random influences for which we are not responsible, or as a result of non-random influences for which we are not responsible, or as a result of influences for which we are proximally responsible but not ultimately responsible. The point seems obvious. Nothing can be ultimately *causa sui* in any respect at all.

(p. 19)

To the extent, then, that contemporary character education still relies on this problematic notion of moral responsibility insofar as 'character educators use a (Kantian) model of choosing actions that accord with principles (or virtues) to which children have freely committed themselves' (Ravven, 2013, p. 44), there appears to be a need for a serious discussion on the possibility of a coherent character education that does not rely on the notions of free will or moral responsibility without at the same time lapsing into complete value nihilism.

In the context of moral education, the unwillingness to seriously consider the plausibility of moral responsibility and free will may be attributed to a fear of legitimising what R. S. Peters calls 'a universal get-out' (2015b, p. 70), rendering

any vice permissible and morality itself redundant. Peters refers to the tendency to attempt to escape from moral accountability as *a social malaise*, closely related to a fashionable and opportunistic referral to causal determinism insofar as it concerns ‘a denial of responsibility coupled with a story about the causes of actions and standards’ (p. 60). People who succumb to this tendency, Peters claims, ‘justify, or excuse, their failure to take responsibility for their own lives by an appeal to causes’ (ibid.). Fearing the spread of this social malaise, Peters paints a dystopian picture of a world without moral responsibility:

If the word goes round that people cannot help doing things because of their class or their upbringing, their conditioning in the carry-cot or some such thing – then they may tend to sit about like angry young men, blaming everyone but themselves, but doing nothing about their condition. Their plight illustrates neatly the contention with which I began: that a social malaise can be the product of half-truths and of intellectual confusion.

(p. 63)

At this point it is important to remind of the metaphysical prerequisites of a free will in terms of the demands it places on our understanding of nature. While a naturalistic understanding assumes that all things are explainable in terms of the same basic kind of regularities, the free (uncaused) will requires a kind of bifurcation of nature. That is, while most known things abide by the same regularities (such as efficient causation), certain things (such as the human will) are attributed the ability to circumscribe these (otherwise universal) regularities and, by so doing, indicate the existence of a parallel world where different rules apply. The problem that this gives rise to is that it becomes difficult to explain these different rules and that they therefore appear as entirely exceptional and supernatural. While the exceptionality of the human will is commonly referred to, there are seldom explanations for this alleged exceptionality. For example, when Peters states that he ‘would want to distinguish carefully between causes proper such as movements of the body and brain, and things like deliberating, deciding, having reasons, understanding truths, etc., which are often also called “causes”’ (p. 66), he fails to provide any rational explanation for this distinction, making it a brute fact.

Disregarding the lack of explanation behind this bifurcation of nature, we might still fear the practical results of denying free will and, for this reason, agree with Peters’ appraisal concerning the social malaise of irresponsibility. The important question, then, is whether Peters’ dystopian image is the likely result of denying spontaneity in nature. Would the denial of a free will lead to social collapse and the end of morality? On the other hand, if, as David Gordon concludes, ‘[a]ny teacher who sets himself the task of getting all his pupils to freely decide to do what they in fact ought to do, has set himself an impossible task’ (1975, p. 415), the question is this: what paths of inquiry remain open for character education? Is there no way to conceive of a coherent form of character education without at the same time assuming the existence of a free (uncaused) will?

Returning to Aristotle, we saw earlier that the Aristotelian will may be conceived in terms of a naturalistic understanding of the will, where decisions are taken to follow naturally from a person's character. The will, in this sense, is not free insofar as it is always the outcome of a person's character disposition. At the same time, Aristotle (1984) construes justified praise and blame as being conditioned by voluntariness (*NE*, Book III, 1114b). For an action to be voluntary, it needs to be caused by the agent performing it, and it needs to be not caused by ignorance. For an action not to be voluntary, in contrast, it needs to be caused by something external to the agent or by ignorance. Character education, from a classical Aristotelian point of view (as well as from the point of view of Confucianism and Buddhist virtue ethics), therefore focuses on formation of character, where a person's choices are conceived as the natural outcome of his or her character. If a person makes bad choices, it is either because he or she was forced in the direction of that choice (by external causes) or because of lack of knowledge. To amend this lack of knowledge would therefore be the goal of character education.

Contemporary western models of character education, being clearly influenced by a more Kantian understanding of the will, have tended to focus less on the cultivation of character and more on the individual student's ability to make the right choices. This has accentuated the problematic aspects of the concept of a free will in a way that classical Aristotelian ethics largely avoids. Since Aristotle's ethics rely on pre-modern notions such as the *telos* of human existence, where every human being is believed to be naturally predisposed to strive for 'their true or most fully realised form' (Sanderse, 2015, p. 393), in a sense which is clearly not compatible with a post-Copernican worldview, it begs the question of whether the modern Kantian amendment to Aristotelianism is the most viable alternative for contemporary character education.

It is to this end that I would like to turn to Spinoza, being both a virtue ethicist and a causal determinist (as well as a necessitarian), in order to investigate the currency of such an alternative. What is particularly interesting about Spinoza in this context is his refusal to adapt his ethical theory (as well as his metaphysical framework) to the modern yearning for a free will that can act as a guarantor for moral responsibility while still being firmly grounded in a western Enlightenment tradition of thought.

A Spinozistic approach to character education and virtues: understanding and accepting natural causation

It seems that Spinoza does not share R. S. Peters' concern regarding the dangers of denying the reality of moral responsibility. Perhaps Spinoza can even offer a way of reconciling the Aristotelian concept of virtue with a thoroughly naturalistic understanding of the will in an educational setting where the cultivation of a virtuous character need not be synonymous with personal decision-making. Instead, a virtuous character, on Spinoza's view, is marked by an understanding of the natural limitations of a human being, an understanding that in itself may lead to a sense of *eudaimonia*.

Eudaimonia for Spinoza is a form of happiness best described as the tranquility of mind resulting from understanding and accepting natural causation. It follows from this that a virtuous character is the result of a life characterised by an affirmation of this understanding. The striving to persevere of the individual may then join with the striving of others so as to form a community founded on reason rather than one held together by superstition and fear. The construction and maintenance of such a community would be the goal of a Spinozistic character education, and as long as the free will is construed as a supernatural force intervening with the common order of nature, it poses a threat to the well-being of such a community.

As we saw in the previous chapter, this is easier said than done. If Spinoza is right in arguing that the belief in free will is an innate idea, and that it is part of a much more comprehensive misrepresentation of the world, then it raises questions about the capacity of education for reimagining the same world from a different perspective. One aspect of this is epistemological, and it culminates in the question of whether this can be done and if so, then, how? Another aspect is ethical, and it culminates in the question of whether this conception of education deserves to be called moral at all? I will postpone the investigation of the first question to Chapter 5, where we will look at the practical currency of Spinoza's determinism for the philosophy of education. The second question, concerning the viability of Spinoza's ethical theory, deserves our immediate attention, as it appears crucial for evaluating what Spinoza has to offer contemporary moral education.

Looking back at the previous chapter, we know that Spinoza's understanding of virtue corresponds with his understanding of power (E4D8). We also know that what is good is whatever increases one's power to act (whatever this might be) insofar as it is useful (E4D1). What is good is what will help us persevere in being. Because joy or happiness is understood in terms of an affective transition whereby we increase our power of acting (E3DOA 2), it is good.

Spinoza's conception of virtue hinges on his understanding that the foundation of virtue is self-preservation. Spinoza states this explicitly in E4p22c, which reads: 'The striving to preserve oneself is the first and only foundation of virtue.' Accordingly, anything that is conducive to self-preservation is deemed to be virtuous. That is, anything that helps us persevere in being is virtuous and anything that hinders this striving is a vice. This conception of virtue – as anything that helps me persevere in being – strongly hints at Spinoza's leanings towards psychological and ethical egoism (Nadler, 2013). If the foundation of virtue is to persevere and flourish in being, and if what is instrumental for this striving differs to some extent from individual to individual, then this means that my ethical striving will be geared for my own self-preservation without at the same time guaranteeing the self-preservation of anything else.¹⁴ If this is so, then it clearly begs the question of how this can provide a stable foundation for any kind of functional moral theory at all.

In order to answer this question in the positive, it helps to take a closer look at two related aspects of Spinoza's ethical theory. First, we need to look closer at the

status of moral knowledge so as to evaluate how Spinoza's ethical constructivism can be reconciled with an account of moral realism allowing for a meaningful understanding of virtue. Second, we need to look at Spinoza's conception of what constitutes self-preservation beyond mere survival, and, in extension, how self-preservation is conditioned by benevolence and a strong sense of community.

Spinoza on the status of moral knowledge

For Spinoza, good and evil are only legitimate (and intelligible) values insofar as we approach the world from the perspective of striving things (what Spinoza calls finite modes). Things that strive need external things that help them strive in order to succeed in their striving. As we have seen, the things that are beneficial for this striving would be good and the things that are inhibiting for it would be evil. When we approach the world from the perspective of nature as substance, however, there is no such thing as good or evil since nature is perfect and all-encompassing for Spinoza. That is, for good and evil to make sense, there needs to be an external model according to which we may judge something either good or evil. For nature there is no such model. Nature is that model itself if you will. For humans, however, being striving things, Spinoza posits the model of a fully rational being (what he calls the free man [E4p66s–E4p77]) who is determined to act by himself alone. In relation to this model we all fall short (insofar as we are not self-sufficient beings (like God or Nature) but very much dependent on external things for our survival and flourishing), but we may posit it as an ideal from where to deduce our practical concepts of good and evil.

Good and evil, from the perspective of striving humans, are universal notions describing whatever will help someone, respectively hinder someone, in becoming more like the ideal of Spinoza's free man. Assuming that good and evil are intrinsic qualities would be a mistake, however, since, in themselves, things are neither good nor evil, but simply things striving (and sometimes failing miserably) to become more empowered and more self-determined (cf. E4pref). Since nature as substance is completely self-determined and self-caused there is nothing external to it that could serve as its model. It is in this sense that good and evil are meaningless terms when we approach nature as substance, but helpful insofar as we approach individual things striving to perfect themselves. In a sense then, Spinoza offers a kind of subjectivism, albeit one that is only subjective insofar as it caters to the need of all finite modes *qua* striving things. At the same time, it is a form of moral realism in the sense that what is good for one striving thing – i.e. anything that furthers its ability to understand and to cause more – is good for all striving things. Depending on whether we look at the world from the perspective of nature as substance (*Natura naturans*) or from the perspective of nature as the totality of individual striving things (*Natura naturata*), then, the status of values like good and evil changes from subjective to objective.

In order to continue unpacking Spinoza's distinction between intrinsic values and universally valid values – where intrinsic values are claimed to be nonsensical whereas universally valid values are taken to be objectively true – we might draw

on Gilles Deleuze's treatment of the crucial difference between morality and ethics in Spinoza. Deleuze argues that Spinoza discards morality, as morality necessarily relies on the notion of intrinsic values, in favour of ethics which is taken to be a concept describing the naturalistic tenets of good and bad derived from an adequate understanding of nature. To this end, Deleuze writes:

In this way, Ethics, which is to say, a typology of immanent modes of existence, replaces Morality, which always refers existence to transcendent values. Morality is the judgment of God, the *system of Judgment*. But Ethics overthrows the system of judgement. The opposition of values (Good-Evil) is supplanted by the qualitative difference of modes of existence (good-bad).

(Deleuze, 1988, p. 23, emphasis in original)

This explication is helpful insofar as it illustrates how it is that Spinoza can disqualify intrinsic values on the basis of his dismissal of a law-giving God while still retaining the universally valid values of good and bad on the basis of the pervasiveness of the non-teleological *conatus* doctrine.

Even though Spinoza proposes an objective notion of what is good for all striving things, he does not limit this to traditionally moral concerns. What is more, as Charles Jarrett suggests, Spinoza's concepts of good and evil are constructivist notions insofar as 'the concept of moral permissibility (or having a right to do something), necessarily applies to everything actual and the concept of what is morally wrong necessarily applies to nothing' (2014, p. 73). This, Jarrett argues, marks such a great divergence from our ordinary understanding of moral knowledge that 'his view is better described as rejecting, or not having, moral concepts of what is right, wrong, or permissible' (ibid.). As we saw in Chapter 3, Spinoza's ethical theory posits the nature of moral labels to be psychological, which follows from his denial of teleology in nature. Misconceiving nature as a striving thing, Spinoza maintains that humans generally tend to ascribe psychological features to nature, thereby making the mistake of assuming that moral concepts are intrinsic qualities rather than modes of thinking, which is what he takes them to be. Accordingly, in the Appendix to Part I of the *Ethics*, Spinoza writes:

All the prejudices I here undertake to expose depend on this one: that men commonly suppose that all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end; indeed, they maintain as certain that God himself directs all things to some certain end, for they say that God has made all things for man, and man that he might worship God. So I shall begin by considering this one prejudice, asking *first* [I] why most people are satisfied that it is true, and why all are so inclined by nature to embrace it. *Then* [II] I shall show its falsity, and *finally* [III] how, from this, prejudices have arisen concerning *good* and *evil*, *merit* and *sin*, *praise* and *blame*, *order* and *confusion*, *beauty* and *ugliness*, and other things of this kind.

(EpIapp, emphasis in original)

If we understand moral concepts to be psychological labels, or modes of thinking, it follows that even though in a general sense what is good for one striving thing – i.e. anything that benefits its striving to persevere – is good for all striving things, when it comes to determining what, more precisely, this would be, we need to look at the particular constitution of the striving thing in question. In other words, the particular constitution of my body and mind determines what is beneficial and what is inhibiting for its perseverance. In this sense, while it is true that it is good for all striving things to persevere in being, it is also true that determining what will help a particular striving thing persevere is a matter of identifying things that empower rather than overpower it. Justin Steinberg offers a useful example illustrating the problems with assuming that what is good for one person is automatically good for another:

For instance, even if an ideally rational person would have no need to study for a logic exam, it would be patently foolish for most young logic students to emulate the ideal or to take the description of an ideal agent as prescriptive for them.

(2014, p. 182)

On self-preservation beyond mere survival and the relative complexity of bodies

Spinoza understands self-preservation to be something more than a prolonged durational existence. In order to see how this is so, we need to look at Spinoza's gradualist understanding of existence. For Spinoza there are degrees of reality and the more reality something has, the more it can be said to exist. The degree of reality of a thing hinges on its activity. Something that is active is more real – relatively speaking – than something that is passive. Of course, everything is passive to some degree. A thing's passivity is determined by the extent to which it depends on other things for its existence. Anything caused by something else is passive to some degree, but the more something can determine itself, the more active it is. In other words, the more things it can cause, the more reality it enjoys. The *conatus* of every finite thing therefore dictates that it strives to become more active, i.e. to strive to cause more things, so as to be able to exist more in the here and now and not just to live longer.

Certain things are more successful in this endeavour than others. For Spinoza, this depends on the complexity of the individual. A highly complex individual – such as a human being – is composed of many simpler bodies, and can therefore be affected by and affect many other bodies. A less complex individual – such as a stone – is composed of fewer interacting parts and is therefore less capable of affecting and being affected. All of this hinges on Spinoza's mechanistic understanding of the world. Everything is understood in terms of bodies moving and interacting. Given Spinoza's parallelism (outlined in Chapter 3), the upshot of this is that 'in proportion as a body is more capable than others of doing many

things at once, or being acted on in many ways at once, so its mind is more capable than others of perceiving many things at once' (E2p13s).

Certain things, Spinoza claims, are good (*qua* empowering) for all rational people. Since rational people are assumed to have enough in common to benefit from roughly (although not precisely) the same things, it is good for them to aspire for these things while avoiding other things. These things, then, amount to a virtuous character geared for living a life according to the guidance of reason. One such thing is friendship and another is benevolence. This may seem contradictory given Spinoza's focus on self-preservation. The fact is, however, that self-preservation is greatly benefited by friendship and by benevolence (Nadler, 2014). To understand this it helps to recall Spinoza's conception of an individual as a body made up of many smaller bodies. The human body makes for one such complex individual made up of many smaller parts that are 'responsive to one another in [a] systematic way' (Della Rocca, 1996, p. 207). But the human body can also make for one such part combining with other parts providing that they are similar enough to respond to one another systematically. Spinoza's conception of an ideal society is therefore of a great body made up of many interacting parts (*qua* rational individuals) sustaining a relation of motion and rest among one another. For this ideal to come true, however, many people must combine so that their individual power can be multiplied by joining with others who are like them.¹⁵ For Spinoza it is therefore rational – and conducive to self-preservation – to form friendships so as to become more powerful and be able to better withstand the threat of being overpowered by external forces. Part of this involves acting benevolently, so as to help people become more rational, and thereby more like oneself. In this way, we help ourselves persevere in being by helping others strive to do the same. This is conditioned by the fact that '[a] thing that shares my nature must, like anything, strive to preserve its own nature; and because its own nature is like my nature, it is therefore necessarily striving to preserve *my* nature' (Nadler, 2014, p. 49, emphasis in original). It is therefore rational to help others, not out of pity or because we hope that they will give us something in return, but because helping them become more rational is a way of helping ourselves. Self-preservation, then, is at the same time conceived as an egoistic striving to empower oneself (by E3p6) and a bedrock for a flourishing community insofar as it functions by uniting many people striving for the same thing (by E4p18s).¹⁶

A model of moral education or a moral model of education?

The shift in focus from assigning moral responsibility to improving the understanding of natural causation is what sets a Spinozistic model of moral education apart most markedly from other dominant accounts of moral education. In Chapter 1 of *The Self Beyond Itself* (2013), Ravven sets out to outline the notion of the free will as a common denominator of the four major models of moral education in a contemporary American context. To this end she claims that, as different as

they may be in some regards, they all share ‘a reliance on a notion of free will, decision making, and obligation to follow discrete moral principles as guides for action’ (p. 46). The four models that Ravven refers to are contemporary character education, values clarification, Kohlbergian cognitive moral development and a care ethical approach to moral education. Accordingly, she argues that ‘[a]ll four models seem to presuppose that social problems are moral problems and are due to aggregates of bad individual choices and personal decisions’ (p. 41). As we have seen, from a Spinozistic perspective, the free will is deemed an illusion and as a result assigning moral responsibility becomes deeply problematic.

While moral responsibility, in the sense of praise and blame, appears incompatible with Spinoza’s naturalism, we might still say that transforming students into people who are responsible for their actions – meaning that they are active rather than passive – is a central goal of moral education. The way to go about this is to encourage students to learn more about themselves and their affective responses to external things so that they may understand their affects to the point where they become the adequate cause of some of their actions. This – to become the adequate cause of some of our actions – is Spinoza’s definition of freedom insofar as freedom pertains to humans *qua* finite modes. This is the highest level of self-determination we can hope for, being necessarily caused by, and dependent on, external things. Since absolute freedom for Spinoza amounts to being completely self-caused and self-sustained (E1D7), it follows that this is a kind of freedom that we can never attain. In contrast, the weaker notion of freedom that involves being the adequate cause of some of our actions is a gradual process of deliberation that serves as a motivation for moral education insofar as a virtuous character is the same as living according to the guidance of reason. From this it becomes clear that Spinoza’s concept of human freedom corresponds with his concept of power of acting, which in turn is equivalent to his notion of virtue. Self-preservation, being the foundation of virtue, is therefore conceived as an empowering and liberating project geared to overcoming passive responses and seeking out the things that will empower us and bring us lasting joy. It is important to underline, however, that it is not liberating in the sense that it allows us to act otherwise. Instead, it is liberating in the sense that understanding the causal necessity of our actions will bring us peace of mind and will serve to protect us from the anxiety of wishing that we had acted differently when in fact we could not.

A Spinozistic understanding of moral education will clearly need to adapt to Spinoza’s naturalistic account of the human mind, which means that affects are considered in mechanistic terms as increases and decreases in power, and that a virtuous character amounts to a life guided by a rational understanding of what is empowering and what is not. As a result, moral education would be centred on finding out what empowers a particular student and what diminishes his or her power of acting. Part of this involves finding this out through practical experimentation, where the student needs to experience many things so as to be able to judge with some precision which are good and which are not. Part of it involves letting this process of experimentation be guided by rational principles guarding, on a more general level, against the dangers of excess and defect. As we

saw in Chapter 3, this means finding ways of aligning joy with perseverance. This is a matter of cognitive training insofar as certain things that are sweet yet detrimental for us needs to be avoided while the sweet and empowering needs to be sought out. It is not enough, however, to simply expose one's students to many different things. If it were so then we would not need education at all. The challenge, instead, is to help students reorder the ideas that they have by 'breaking old associations between accidentally formed ideas and replacing them with *new* associations, ones forged according to the order of reason' (Marshall, 2013, p. 187, emphasis in original) – thereby turning inadequate ideas into adequate ideas. Clearly, this goes beyond habitual self-regulation insofar as it demands an improvement of the understanding and not just a regulation of conduct motivated by praise and blame. It is the role of the teacher to oversee this cognitive training, reminding students of the dictates of reason much like the optimistic nutritionist reminds patients of the important connection between sweetness and nutrition.

The problem is that from the perspective of moral education it becomes difficult to separate the specific moral aspects from more general epistemological concerns. Since Spinoza's ethical theory amounts to a reflection of his epistemological account (dressed up in traditional moral terminology) there is no tangible boundary between the descriptive aspects of the account of human nature – as the striving to persevere in being – and its normative upshot – that whatever furthers this striving is good for us. Lacking the notion of natural ends, Spinoza's ethical theory is deprived of a crucial part of what other available accounts of moral education appears to take for granted; that because moral knowledge is taken to designate certain specific aspects of the good life – rather than designating anything that furthers our striving to persevere – moral knowledge may be understood in terms of an end in itself. In relation to this end, a student's responses to various situations may be evaluated and deemed more or less moral. Consequently, the aim of guiding a student's decision-making relative to this end becomes a central part of moral education. For Spinoza, however, where the concepts of 'will, appetite, and desire all identify from the perspective of fundamental concepts ("thought" and "extension"), one and the same causal dimension of a thing's essential nature' (Hübner, 2017, p. 363), the discussion of moral education risks becoming redundant since its aim of advancing the general understanding of the students would apply to any aspect of education in equal measures. This is so since ethics, for Spinoza, may be described in terms of 'a category of his metaphysics' meaning that '[i]t is not a grounding or a derivation of ethics from metaphysics, but a reduction of the former to the latter' (p. 367).

While a Spinozistic model of moral education appears to amount to an account of education general enough to encompass all of education, it remains true that it is *a moral account* of education. Even though it may not be appropriate to label it a model of moral education – given that moral education without moral agency may be too far removed from what we generally require of moral education – I would argue that it provides a productive understanding of the relation between

morality and epistemology in education. It is productive insofar as it confronts the traditional philosophical conflict ‘between desires and appetites on the one hand and will on the other’ (p. 363). By subordinating all of these concepts to Spinoza’s strict naturalism, the question of morality becomes a question of understanding our nature as striving things where freedom is not freedom from constraint but the freedom to understand and accept our limited control over ourselves and the world. Consequently, it may be appropriate to talk of a moral model of education rather than a model of moral education. This way, Spinoza’s radical naturalisation of morality makes for an intriguing framework for all of education rather than a model for understanding the specifically moral aspects of education. While the aim of education is moral insofar as it is geared to furthering the students’ striving to persevere, this aim is realised through the general improvement of the understanding of nature rather than through the inculcation of specific moral values and standards.¹⁷

In the next chapter, we will look closer at the various consequences of causal determinism for human autonomy. This is important as it will aid in illustrating the limitations of an account of education formulated from a deterministic point of view. We will also investigate the educational promise of Spinoza’s epistemology so as to find out more about what a Spinozistic education for autonomy might look like in practical terms, and what constraints such an account would entail. Specifically, this involves investigating Spinoza’s distinction between false beliefs and valuable fictions, as this may offer a way of working with the idea of free will in education without subscribing to a fundamentally flawed understanding of human nature.

Notes

- 1 For a discussion on the rising political interest in character education, see Curren (2017).
- 2 Correspondingly, to be able to make choices is generally taken to be what constitutes being free. For a choice to be genuinely autonomous, in turn, it is – as we have seen – generally required that one is the cause of one’s choice. Accordingly, in the context of educational theory, Kenneth Strike offers the following three conditions of freedom:
 - 1 A person must be able to do what he chooses. This includes possessing relevant abilities and skills of execution as well as not being prohibited or physically prevented from taking a chosen course of action.
 - 2 A person must possess those reasoning skills which enable him to evaluate various courses of action. This is a matter of having learned to apply those criteria relevant to making various sorts of judgements.
 - 3 A person must be psychologically constituted such that it is possible for the exercise of such reasoning skills to become the actual determinates of choice and action.

(1972, p. 274)
- 3 Cuypers, for example, contends that ‘[t]he complementary issues of manipulation and autonomy in the metaphysics of free will cover, to a large extent, the same domain as that of indoctrination and authenticity in the philosophy of education’ (2009, p. 124).

- 4 For a helpful discussion on how the four cardinal western virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance correspond to Buddhist virtues (identifying both similarities and differences), see Keown (2007, pp. 101–104).
- 5 For an informed discussion on the relation between (and, to a degree, convergence of) Socratic and Confucian senses of self-cultivation, self-knowledge and ethics of learning, see Kwak (2016). For a brief comparison of the Confucian ethics of virtues and Aristotelian ethics, see Chen (2002).
- 6 For a brief overview of the shifting historical role and the recent revival of Confucianism in Chinese public education, see Wu and Wenning (2016, pp. 559–565).
- 7 Accordingly, Carr writes: ‘The Christian idea of the will as something which operates as an independent source of motivation and choice and which is open to the influence of good or evil is quite different in these crucial respects from Plato’s *thumos* and probably makes its first entrance into western thought with St Augustine’ (1991, p. 37).
- 8 On a similar note, Chris Higgins argues that much of contemporary character education is more concerned with morality in a narrow instrumental sense than with broader ethical concerns insofar as it ‘seems much more concerned with the question, How can we all get along? than with the ethical question, What is it excellent to become?’ (2003, p. 133).
- 9 Cf. Aristotle, 1984/*NE*, Book III, 5.
- 10 John White raises concerns about moral education becoming overly preoccupied with guilt and blame in his *Education and the Good Life* (1990). For a response to White’s concerns, see Chapter 8 in Hand’s *A Theory of Moral Education* (2018). This debate is not, however, explicitly concerned with the problem of free will.
- 11 Authentic education, in Cuypers’ view, is conceived as ‘opposed to indoctrinative education’ insofar as it ‘consists of necessary educational interferences that are conducive to the attainment of the primary educational aim of transforming children into morally responsible agents’ (2009, p. 135).
- 12 Cf. Kant, 1998/A532–58/B560–86.
- 13 Similarly, Young Pai concludes that ‘[t]he feeling of being able to act contrary to his [the agent’s] character may be nothing but an illusion, but it is a psychological fact’ (1966, p. 143).
- 14 In fact, for me to preserve myself I will *need* to destroy other things/bodies, such as the different foods I need to consume in order to vitalize and strengthen my own body.
- 15 Accordingly, in 4p18s Spinoza writes: ‘For if, for example, two individuals of entirely the same nature are joined to one another, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one. To man, then, there is nothing more useful to man. Man, I say, can wish for nothing more helpful than that all should so agree in all things that the minds and bodies of all would compose, as it were, one mind and one body; that all should strive together, as far as they can, to preserve their being; and that all, together, should seek for themselves the common advantage of all.’
- 16 Accordingly, Daniel Garber concludes that ‘sociability and rationality seem linked in Spinoza’s conception of the model of human nature: the perfectly rational character is perfectly sociable as well’ (2004, p. 184).
- 17 Indeed, it may be argued that because Spinoza’s ethical theory does not allow for the justification of intrinsic moral values, a Spinozistic model of moral education does not successfully live up to the minimum standards of moral education. Hand, for example, argues that the justification of moral standards is central for moral education and that it involves elements such as universal enlistment and penalty endorsement. This will appear difficult to reconcile with Spinoza’s constructivism and his thoroughgoing naturalism. Hand writes: ‘What a justification for moral subscription must show is not only that there is good reason for me to comply with a standard, but that there is good reason for me to expect compliance

of others and endorse penalties for non-compliance' (2018, p. 24). In Hand's account, what Spinoza offers are ethical rather than moral standards and as such they are insufficient for a theory of moral education.

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5 Can causal determinism and autonomy coexist?

Causal determinism and moral responsibility

Causal determinism is sometimes referred to as *hard determinism*. Derk Pereboom understands hard determinism as ‘the incompatibilist endorsement of determinism and rejection of the freedom required for moral responsibility’ (1995, p. 21). Soft determinists, on the other hand, ‘claim that we possess the freedom required for moral responsibility, that determinism is true, and that these views are compatible’ (ibid.). Soft determinism is a different label for compatibilism. The compatibilist position – outlined in Chapter 1 – is the dominant one among philosophers debating free will, and it is challenged by hard determinists as well as by libertarians, who may be described as ‘incompatibilist champions of the freedom required for moral responsibility’ (ibid.). Outside of philosophy, the libertarian position is by far the most widespread and widely accepted, and we need look no further than our justice systems or news reporting to appreciate the pervasiveness of libertarianism.¹ A likely reason for the wide acceptance of libertarianism is that we intuitively feel that we have free will, insofar as we are faced with several tricky choices on a daily basis, and that our commonsense and our introspection therefore informs us of this.²

At this point it is wise to remind ourselves that it seems quite reasonable to assume that the question of free will never be conclusively settled by either philosophy or science. As Peter van Inwagen (1983) has pointed out in the concluding chapter of his influential defence of free will: ‘the proposition of free will is inseparably bound up with our deliberative life’ and because of this ‘most of us are certain we have free will’ (p. 205). Beyond the intuitions gained through introspection, however, there are few prospects of ever finding out for certain whether free will is real or not. If we accept determinism, free will seems unlikely (at least according to van Inwagen’s incompatibilist account), and conversely, if we accept indeterminism, it may appear more plausible. For van Inwagen, as we have seen, the strongest case for free will hinges on the notion of moral responsibility. Since praise and blame are deeply engrained in our way of reasoning *vis-à-vis* wrongful acts, he argues, there has to be such a thing as moral responsibility. After all, even philosophers who deny the reality of free will and moral responsibility tend

to blame other people when they themselves have been wronged. While this is certainly true for most (if not all) of us, all it really illustrates is the pervasiveness of free will as a psychological fact (one that may even be innate in us).³ It does not help us build a strong case for its metaphysical plausibility. Again, it may be that this kind of metaphysical truth is hopelessly beyond our reach, and that we will never be able to establish much without having first assumed the truth of either determinism or indeterminism. For determinists it follows that free will remains unlikely as it appears to violate the deterministic structure of the natural world. For libertarians, however, freedom of will is assumed to be necessary for moral responsibility, and since moral responsibility is evidently deeply entwined in the fabric of our everyday moral language, this would go a long way to confirm the reality of free will.

As we saw in Chapter 1, libertarians typically espouse an understanding of the will as a unique faculty where we have the freedom to choose our actions at will and where we are morally accountable for our actions (unless we were in fact tricked or forced into acting wrongfully), since we *could* have acted otherwise. The notion that we are to be justly punished or praised for our actions relies on this assumption. A premise for this is that a person may be identified as ‘the source or originator of the action in a way that precludes determinism’ (Baker, 2006, p. 308). This, then, brings us back to the question of causal control. For libertarianism to hold sway, a person must be identified as the ultimate originator of the effort of willing that in turn brings about an action. As Robert Kane notes: ‘If these willings were in turn caused by something else, so that the explanatory chain could be traced back further to heredity or environment, to God, or fate, then the ultimacy would not lie with the agent but with something else’ (1998, p. 4). The main reason for rejecting libertarianism is that it requires an intervention into natural causation that appears inexplicable or magical. Lynne Rudder Baker summarises the fundamental problem with a libertarian understanding of free will neatly:

Libertarian free action awaits exercise of an ability that no natural being has: the ability to rise above the complex mix of causes (heredity, environment, beliefs, desires, etc.) and interject an unexplainable X factor, over which the agent has ultimate control, and which renders theretofore-insufficient causes sufficient for the choice or action.

(Baker, 2006, p. 314)

From a compatibilist or soft determinist point of view, moral responsibility is not predicated by indeterminism or by ultimate control. Compatibilism accepts determinism to an extent but rejects the hard determinist’s ultimate rejection of moral responsibility. That is, while libertarians and compatibilists diverge on the view concerning ultimate causal control, they still share the basic conviction that ‘moral responsibility concerns the agent in a deep way’ (Baker, 2006, p. 317). A version of compatibilism taking on the hard determinist challenge of moral

responsibility in a nuanced way is the Reflective-Endorsement view. Baker outlines this view as follows:

An agent is morally responsible for an action if he *endorses* the beliefs and desires on which he acts: When he affirms them as his own (and makes no factual errors about circumstances, etc.), he is morally responsible for acting on them.

(Baker, 2006, p. 317, emphasis in original)

In order to be morally responsible for an action, from this perspective, we need to acknowledge and affirm the desires that, while having causes beyond our control, move us to act in a certain way. That is, even though full causal control is deemed unrealistic, there is still a sense in which by affirming my desire to do something as corresponding with my own will I become a moral agent in a true sense. Moral responsibility, then, is salvaged by the fact that I identify psychologically with my actions. It seems to me that while this position illustrates with great clarity that moral responsibility is a pervasive psychological fact, it does not clarify how the notion of moral responsibility has any metaphysical bearing beyond its usefulness as a social fiction.⁴ At this point we may note that the Reflective-Endorsement view is similar to the compatibilist defence of personal autonomy, commonly invoked in educational theory (as discussed at length in Chapter 2).

Pereboom (2001) argues convincingly that when compatibilists are pressed on the issue of how moral responsibility can be explained and defended if the causal process of choices and actions traces back to factors beyond the agent's control, a common strategy is to refer to the importance of our ordinary intuitions telling us that we are morally responsible. The problem with this, Pereboom claims, is that in everyday life 'we do not assume that agents' choices and actions result from deterministic causal processes that trace back to factors beyond their control' (pp. 116–117). Typically, as I argued in Chapter 2, our ordinary folk-psychological intuitions rely instead on a tacit libertarian understanding of free will, where we are indeed assumed to be the originators of our choices. In conclusion, Pereboom suggests that '[i]f we did assume determinism and internalize its implications, our intuitions might well be different' (p. 117).

The challenge posed to hard determinism, by compatibilists as well as libertarians, concerns the threat to morality. How can we retain any meaningful sense of morality without moral responsibility? The key reason for rejecting hard determinism appears to be that once moral responsibility vanishes, so will the moral framework around it. Even if it proves difficult to provide sufficient arguments in favour of moral responsibility (at least in terms of causation), moral responsibility is commonly taken to be a cornerstone of morality and so for the sake of safeguarding morality, moral responsibility must be retained. The crucial question, then, is whether hard determinism really does preclude morality. For it to preclude morality, in this sense, means that it takes away any motivation we might have for striving to act in one way rather than another. This clearly is a frightening picture.

There are, however, good reasons for believing that ‘the determination of our deliberations, choices, actions, and their consequences does not undermine their causal efficacy’ (Pereboom, 1995, p. 31). Even if we are causally determined, the things we do – causally determined as they are – matter in the sense that they are efficient causes and so they are not meaningless in any moral sense. The problem with lack of motivation, as a result of the brutal realisation that my choices are causally determined, can actually be confronted from the perspective of human psychology. That is, while I may come to the intellectual understanding that my actions are most likely determined by antecedent causes, it remains a psychological fact that I experience freedom of will. If this is the case then my sense of free will is just as causally determined as anything else in nature and I therefore have no choice but to act as if free will exists. Accepting hard determinism does not mean that I automatically come to perceive all of the antecedent causes leading up to my actions and so I still cannot predict my actions (even if they are causally predictable in principle) and therefore I have no reason not to deliberate. Pereboom explains this line of reasoning succinctly: ‘As long as one’s actions are determined by deliberation and choice, and one does not know beforehand what the result of one’s deliberation will be, there will be no interference with the deliberative process’ (p. 32).

On the face of it, causal determinism relies on a fairly straightforward and simple assumption, the assumption that everything in the world has a cause and that because everything has a cause, everything is explainable in principle. That things are explainable in principle does not necessarily mean that this explanation is accessible to us however (G. Strawson, 1989). As we saw in Chapter 3, one way of explaining the psychological force of the belief in free will is precisely that because we commonly lack these explanations we assume that we act as first causes ourselves. Because self-causation is difficult to explain, it may appear more likely that the folk psychology of free will functions by compensating for our lack of awareness of the causal history of our actions. This causal history is simply too complex and far-reaching for our cognitive faculties to grasp them. The notion of free will thereby becomes a placeholder for an explanation that is beyond our reach.

But if this explanation is hopelessly beyond our reach, how then can we pursue the educational goal of coming to understand ourselves and the world better without at the same time subsuming this understanding to the folk psychology of free will? One avenue of inquiry that I propose to be productive for solving this puzzle is to approach free will in terms of a *valuable fiction* rather than in terms of an adequate representation of our faculty of willing. This would mean that we accept and make use of the strong hold of the psychology of free will without assuming that it reflects the world such as it is. Before exploring this avenue of inquiry, however, we should first look closer at what kind of autonomy causal determinism allows for. This will be helpful for finding out the limits of the educational promise of causal determinism.

Autonomy without free will

In Chapter 2, we saw that the ordinary conception of autonomy – which I have argued is implicit in many educational accounts – is predicated by indeterminism, where ‘the final explanation of [my choice] is given by the intentional explanation of my action, which is comprehensible only through my point of view’ (Nagel, 1989, p. 115). The ordinary conception of autonomy thereby presupposes free will, insofar as it presupposes the ability to do otherwise. As Pereboom notes, ‘[t]he effort of will is indeterminate in the sense that its causal potential does not become determinate until the choice occurs’ (2001, p. 42).⁵ Being typically grounded in the phenomenology of action – the psychological experience of having real choices – the ordinary conception of autonomy is therefore vulnerable to the same criticism that libertarian free will is in general. That is, beyond the experience of having a choice, it is difficult to explain origination, which is generally taken to be required for moral responsibility.⁶ If I cannot control the sources of my decision, then it is unclear how I can be the originator of my choices.

From a causal deterministic point of view, the consequence of the failure to live up to the requirements of origination is straightforward. We *cannot* be morally responsible for our actions because we *cannot* be the originators of our decisions. Does the acceptance of this consequence preclude human autonomy? Yes and no, depending on how we understand human autonomy. It certainly seems to preclude the ordinary conception of autonomy insofar as this conception hinges on origination. At the same time, we might construe autonomy in a way that does not hinge on origination. Arguably, to decouple autonomy from origination is to move away from human exceptionalism. Pereboom argues that while determinism clearly undermines the aspect of autonomy that is tied up with blameworthiness and praiseworthiness (because it precludes moral responsibility), there are central aspects of Kantian autonomy, for instance, that remain intact. Accordingly, *positive freedom* – ‘a capacity to commit oneself to certain principles of conduct as rationally binding’ (Pereboom, 2001, p. 151) – is a necessary capacity for Kantian autonomy that is consistent with lacking free will. It would therefore seem perfectly reasonable to argue that autonomy can be defended from a causal determinist position. Bruce Waller, for example, defends a position that he calls ‘natural autonomy’ and that is not undergirded by a special human faculty. He introduces his investigation of natural autonomy with the following remarks:

If autonomy and morality are useful adaptations (rather than god-given or self-made mysteries), then it is likely that other animals evolved similar autonomous and moral behavioral adaptations in response to similar environments. By rejecting schemes to guarantee a human monopoly on autonomy and morality, we can examine them writ large in the natural world we share with other animals.

(Waller, 1998, p. 3)

Waller seeks to understand autonomy in fully naturalistic terms. This means that while he maintains that human reason strengthens autonomy, it does not create it *ex nihilo*. Waller thereby rejects the libertarian claim to origination and in extension the libertarian version of autonomy-as-alternatives. Being equally unimpressed by the compatibilist version of autonomy-as-authenticity – where autonomy amounts to identifying with and endorsing one's choices – as it does not, in Waller's view, amount to any real sense of autonomy, he turns instead to a naturalised version of autonomy-as-alternatives. Using the example of experiments with mice learning to navigate through constructed mazes, Waller suggests that there are obvious parallels between the way humans and mice behave and between the way they make decisions by sometimes adapting – finding new solutions by learning from past mistakes – and sometimes falling back on familiar patterns of behaviour – repeating old mistakes out of habit.⁷ From this, Waller concludes that 'autonomy-as-alternatives is grounded in learning strategies that are not the exclusive province of higherlevel rational powers, nor the exclusive property of humans' (p. 8). Humans have more available options than mice, not because they have a special faculty of Reason, but because the human ability to reason is more evolved than the ability of mice. It is a difference in degree, however, not in kind.

Waller calls this ability *natural intelligent autonomy*, and in his view it is a skill developed as a natural survival strategy, determining us to weigh options and make decisions accordingly. While this naturalistic conception of autonomy-as-alternatives cannot support moral responsibility (something that would seem to require a libertarian free will) because it is causally conditioned by the natural environment, Waller maintains that it is a form of autonomy that is clearly very useful for our survival even if it is shaped and constrained by natural causation. The compatibilist understanding, in contrast, might be unthreatened by determinism but it does not amount to any real sense of autonomy in Waller's view. Rather it perpetuates a false belief in autonomy, as it hinges on the psychological ability to identify and endorse decisions as if they were (inexplicably) free in the libertarian sense. Compatibilist accounts of autonomy-as-authenticity are therefore predicated by a confused understanding of one's abilities to act, whereas a naturalistic conception of autonomy is coextensive with a better understanding of, and adaptation to, one's natural environment. As Waller puts it: 'intelligent reflection is not autonomy-enhancing if it operates under deception' (pp. 12–13). Instead, Waller's naturalistic understanding of autonomy-as-alternatives assumes that '[w]hat we require is the opportunity to take a different path in different conditions, the capacity to intelligently consider and pursue other possibilities when a changing world makes an old path less rewarding' (p. 12). This, he argues, is perfectly aligned with a deterministic understanding of the world.

In Waller's naturalistic conception of autonomy-as-alternatives options are genuine even if they are conceived to be naturally occurring. They are not inexplicably self-caused (and they do not presume either freedom of the will or moral responsibility), but they result from our ability to adapt to our natural environment. Waller's options are, nevertheless, genuine options. While this avoids the

libertarian dilemma of origination, it cannot quite satisfy Spinoza's uncompromising demand on explicability. For Spinoza, to say that options are genuinely open is to allow for contingency in the world. Allowing for contingency, in turn, means having to explain why some things are restricted by universal laws of nature while others are not. This is different from saying that we lack the necessary knowledge to explain the causal history of our options and to thereby foresee their effects. While the former is a metaphysical statement about causal relations (or the lack thereof), the latter is a description of a psychological and cognitive limitation that inhibits our full understanding of the world. Spinoza's naturalistic understanding of autonomy departs from Waller's in this sense. It is not necessarily a fundamental difference however. Waller is clear on the matter that options arise naturally in a deterministic world and that decision-making is not a case of self-causation, but of a naturally constrained ability to weigh one's options given the limitations of one's experience and the constraints of one's natural environment. Still, while Waller's autonomy is focused on enhancing our options, Spinoza's autonomy is focused on improving our understanding of our limitations as choosers.⁸

From Spinoza's perspective, we need to keep our options open precisely because of an innate privation of knowledge. If we had a complete understanding of the causes moving us to act, then we would not need to deliberate. Because we lack this knowledge, however, we need to try out different strategies and we sometimes find that we suffer from *akrasia* (weakness of the will), because while we suspect that we ought to be acting differently, our uncertainty allows for powerful affects to move us in the opposite direction. We are, as it were, torn between opposing affects and while we might see that one decision would be more beneficial in a long-term sense, we experience the other to be more powerful because it has a short-term effect that we can perceive more clearly. In E4p9 Spinoza states: 'An affect whose cause we imagine to be with us in the present is stronger than if we did not imagine it to be with us.' If we could assume an external standpoint we would have no problem choosing the long-term good over the short-term good. Because we are limited to the narrow perspective of our bodies, however, we are vulnerable to our affective impressions telling us that what is closer in time and space is – wrongly – more real than what is distant in time and space. This makes it difficult for us to avoid akratic behaviours and we often experience ourselves being overwhelmed by irrational, yet very powerful, desires.

On Spinoza's account, our options are not genuinely open. Because we cannot cognitively encompass their causal history we have no choice but to deliberate and do our best to figure out which strategy fits our current situation, while drawing on our past experiences and our natural ability to adapt to new environments. The more knowledge we gain about ourselves and our environment, the more we will be able to see and understand the grounds for our decisions. This gradual improvement of our understanding is, as pointed out in Chapter 2, tantamount to Spinoza's conception of autonomy, and while it is not to be conceived in terms of an autonomy from the constraints of natural causation, it is a form of autonomy that hinges on the ability to operate more in accordance with our understanding as opposed to being always at the mercy of the whims of

our passive affects. Spinoza is no Stoic in the sense that he believes that we can acquire full control over our passive responses however. Again, this would mean that we would be elevated from the position of finite modes, which is inconceivable. To endeavour to improve our understanding, then, would not liberate us from ourselves. It would simply increase our natural ability to act in accordance with our understanding.

Free will as a valuable fiction⁹

Remembering the connection Pereboom (1995) makes between our capacity for deliberating and our lack of knowledge of the causes that determine us to act, we might turn to a similar line of reasoning in Spinoza. In Chapter 4 of the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza discusses the relation between divine law (laws of nature) and human law (laws drawn up through social contract). While he claims that all things (without exception) necessarily abide by the pervasive laws of nature, he also argues for the value of maintaining human law as a placeholder, compensating for our innate privation of knowledge. That is, because we lack the capacity to perceive the connection of all natural things – a capacity that would automatically make us perceive the causal necessity of all things as modes of substance – we construe a concept of law that is provisional and inadequate in that it assumes that things are possible rather than necessary. While this is founded on an inadequate conception of natural things, it functions by speaking to the imagination in terms of *a valuable fiction*. As Justin Steinberg notes, ‘whatever value such fictions have, it is obviously not on account of what they directly reveal, but rather because of some indirect good that results from how these ideas affect the mind’ (2018, p. 266). For example, then, ‘the idea of an open future [. . .] might stimulate us to act in ways that are more consistent with our aims than if we acted just on our beliefs’ (ibid.). Accordingly, Spinoza writes that

we ought to define and explain things through their proximate causes. That universal consideration concerning fate and the connection of causes cannot help us to form and order our thoughts concerning particular things. Furthermore, we are completely ignorant of the order and connection of things itself, i.e., of how things are really ordered and connected. *So for practical purposes it is better, indeed necessary, to consider things as possible.*

(TTP IV, 4/p. 126, emphasis added)¹⁰

On the face of it, this appears quite paradoxical. On the one hand, the idea of an open future is clearly a fiction for Spinoza, but on the other hand, he suggests that it may be a useful fiction insofar as it is conducive to our overarching ethical aim of self-preservation (which, as we saw in Chapters 2 and 3, is coextensive with improving our understanding of natural causation). The problem is that as long as we lack the cognitive capacities necessary for understanding the world such as it is (in all its complexity), it may be better for us to hold on to some fictions even though they are founded on an inadequate understanding of the world. In order

to unpack this seeming paradox, we need to look closer at Spinoza's distinction between fictions and beliefs.

Beliefs, for Spinoza, are imaginings that are sustained or uninterrupted by other – more powerful – imaginings. In the scholium to E2p49 he offers the example of a child holding a belief about the existence of a winged horse. He explains that

[s]ince this imagination involves the existence of the horse (by P17C), and the child does not perceive anything else which excludes the existence of the horse, he will necessarily regard the horse as present. Nor will he be able to doubt its existence, though he will not be certain of it.

The belief in winged horses will therefore be sustained as long as there are no other ideas that exclude it. When a belief – an affirmation of something's existence – is countered by another, more powerful, belief, it may be discarded as a false belief. Fictions, unlike beliefs, are ideas that are “joined to” ideas that either positively exclude the existence of the feigned idea or at least render it dubious by neutralising its power’ (Steinberg, 2018, p. 265). To regard the future as being open may be entertained as a fiction insofar as we doubt its adequacy, but we may still make use of it to compensate for a privation of knowledge. The difference between beliefs and fictions, then, is that while a belief is joined to other beliefs that determine its epistemic status, fictions are isolated placeholders for something that we cannot adequately represent. The practical implication of this is that we may feign something without actually believing it. Accordingly, in his early work, the unfinished *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect*, Spinoza explains that ‘between fictions and false ideas there is no other difference except that the latter suppose assent,’ meaning that with false ideas ‘there appear no causes from which he can infer (as he who is feigning can) that they do not arise from things outside of him’ (*TdIE* §66/ p. 30).¹¹ With fictions there are accompanying causes that prevent us from actually believing in them.

Fictions depend on a privation of knowledge in the sense that they would cease being fictions if we clearly understood their causes. Spinoza describes fictions in terms of possible things, not in the sense that they are ontologically possible (which would contradict his commitments to causal determinism and necessitarianism) but in the sense that since we lack the knowledge for determining whether a fiction is real, we regard it as merely possible. Spinoza explains:

I call a thing impossible whose nature implies that it would be contradictory for it to exist; necessary whose nature implies that it would be contradictory for it not to exist; and possible whose existence, by its very nature, does not imply a contradiction – either for it to exist or for it not to exist – but whose necessity or impossibility of existence depends on causes unknown to us, so long as we feign its existence. *So if its necessity or impossibility, which depends on external causes, were known to us, we would be able to feign nothing concerning it.*

(*TdIE* §53/pp. 23–24, emphasis added)

So long as we lack this knowledge about something, we may entertain fictions about it. This means that there is a direct connection between our lack of knowledge and our ability to feign. Spinoza claims that ‘the less the mind understands and the more things it perceives, the greater its power of feigning is; and the more things it understands, the more the power is diminished’ (*TdIE* §58/pp. 26–27). Certain things, then, are more liable to give rise to fictions than other things. On Spinoza’s account, the more general something is, the more likely it is to be feigned as it is more complex and more cognitively demanding to grasp (*TdIE* §55/p. 25). This relates to Spinoza’s understanding of universal notions, being confused ideas that result from our cognitive inability to encompass something in all of its complexity. This concerns general notions like *man*, *horse* or *dog*, that

have arisen from similar causes, viz. because so many images (e.g., of men) are formed at one time in the human Body that they surpass the power of imagining – not entirely, of course, but still to the point where the Mind can imagine neither slight differences of the singular [men] (such as the color and size of each one, etc.) nor their determinate number.

(E2p40s1)

In order to compensate for the inability to be cognisant of all of the different variations of dogs we come up with a simplified notion that makes use of certain arbitrary characteristics while downplaying others. It seems likely that this is a necessary way of ordering our haphazard impressions of things in the world, but, at the same time, it is clear that these universal notions do not amount to adequate representations of individual dogs. As is evident from the quoted passage from the *TTP* earlier, Spinoza claims that there are times when we are better served entertaining provisional yet valuable fictions than by attempting (and failing) to grasp something that is beyond our cognition to fully comprehend. According to Steinberg, the idea of an open future is precisely this kind of valuable fiction ‘to be imagined but not believed’ (2018, p. 266).

Valuable fictions and autonomy

The question we need to ask ourselves at this point is how valuable fictions can be utilised to strengthen autonomy without them turning into false beliefs that undermine autonomy insofar as they make us less cognisant about the world than we would need to be. This question has two parts, the first concerns how we can ensure that fictions do not turn into false beliefs, and the second is how fictions can be made to support rather than inhibit human autonomy. With regard to the first part of the question, Steinberg asks how fictions can ‘exhibit the potency of beliefs without thereby becoming beliefs’ (p. 275). In answer, he writes that:

Part of the explanation is that powerful fictions are quite isolated – quarantined, as it were – from one’s other potent ideas. When one leaves the

movie theater and the immediate stimulus for the fiction is lost, there is no network of ideas that will bolster these fictions. This is true for other fictions that one *knows* to be false: one can *feign* them, and thereby temporarily (and perhaps potently) affirm them, without worrying that they will undermine one's (opposing) commitments, because, provided that no further compensatory adjustment are made that enable such ideas to gain a greater foothold in one's belief-system, there is a firm doxastic buffer that prevents them from exerting a steady influence. So, fictions, as isolated ideas, can be profoundly affirmed without being believed; unfortunately, so can rogue desires or representations of goodness.

(ibid., emphasis in original)

While a false belief is invested in a network of other ideas that help sustain and affirm it as part of our greater understanding of the world, valuable fictions are confused notions that do not pretend to offer us an adequate understanding of the world, but that may give us access to ways in which we can become educated in spite of our cognitive limitations. To answer the first part of our question, then, we need to ensure that fictions are not passed off as philosophical truth claims, but as provisional fictions that can help compensate for an innate privation of knowledge without masquerading as valid replacements of this knowledge. We will look at how this can be done in an educational context in the next section. Addressing the second part of the question – how fictions can be made to support the striving for autonomy – we need to look closer at what distinguishes valuable fictions from fictions in general.

Spinoza's preferred example of fictions used to instil moral behaviour in irrational people is the stories in the Bible. In the *TTP*, Spinoza presents a forceful critique of revealed religion insofar as he refutes the notions of a providential God and the literal interpretation of Scripture. As he establishes in the appendix to Part 1 of the *Ethics*, these notions arise because of a privation of knowledge. Being unaware of the true causes of things, humans tend to ascribe teleological ends to natural things and 'so they will not stop asking for the causes of causes until you take refuge in the will of God, i.e., the sanctuary of ignorance' (Elapp). On the other hand, Spinoza grants that biblical stories hold a great appeal to the imagination and can convey deep moral lessons that instil in people a sense of ethics that is conducive for sociability and can help temper their irrational hatred towards one another. In this sense they are useful, not because they are literally true, but because they contain an ethical truth (that can moderate other, more detrimental affects) in the guise of an imaginative story. Fictions can help us treat one another with kindness, and, since peaceful relations are conducive to the improvement of the understanding (as it tempers our fear of one another), this is preferable to a confused understanding breeding suspicion and animosity. This, however, requires an understanding of biblical stories as fictions, lest people fall prey to superstition in a way that prevents them from taking the ethical lessons of the Bible to heart. Spinoza laments that '[t]he more extravagantly they wonder at these

mysteries, the more they show that they don't so much believe Scripture as give lip service to it' (*TTP* pref., 17/p. 71).

The stories of the Bible, according to Spinoza, do not contain deep mysteries, but convey simple moral precepts – such as 'to defend justice, to aid the poor, to kill no one, to covet nothing belonging to another, and so on' (*TTP* XII, 37, p. 255) – told in a way that appeals to the imagination of ordinary people. Of course, these precepts can be communicated perfectly well through philosophy, but Spinoza contends that most uneducated people are far less prone to be moved by reason than by their imagination. Recalling Spinoza's notion of the free man (the fully rational person) – discussed in Chapter 4 – we can draw a useful parallel here. Just like it would not make sense for someone to emulate the behaviour of a fully rational person (an unexperienced student, unlike a fully rational person, would need to study hard for exams, for instance), it would miss the mark to encourage people to emulate, rather than strive for, an ideal. In an educational context (or, in fact, in most any context), we should assume that we are dealing with people who are not even close to fully rational. It would therefore be better to make use of fictions that allow us to glimpse ethical truths that move us via the imagination than by imprinting upon people an ideal that would most likely frustrate rather than aid them in their ethical development.

There are of course limitations to what fictions of this sort can accomplished. As noted earlier, fictions are placeholders for knowledge that we lack and can therefore not offer a passage to an adequate understanding of the world. At best, they can ensure that people do not act in ways that threaten one another needlessly (without necessarily seeing why), allowing those who strive for improving their understanding the freedom to do so. Fictions may offer a way of checking our most irrational responses when reason itself does not suffice. It is important not to mistake fictions for philosophical truths, however, because then we end up mistaking arbitrary rules of conduct (useful for securing peace among irrational people) for eternal truths that adequately portray natural causation. By doing so we perpetuate false beliefs that stand to threaten the coextensive educational aims of improving the understanding and increasing autonomy.

Valuable fictions, as distinguished from other kinds of fictions, are fictions that not only protect us from irrationality, but that are actually useful for our striving for self-preservation. They are what we might call educational fictions that can be made to exploit the imagination to further the development of a rational understanding of the world. Moira Gatens explains the difference between what she calls philosophical exemplars (amounting to valuable fictions) and fictions that are only useful insofar as they can moderate irrationality:

In the case of the philosophical *exemplar* one is aware that the ideal is a fictional device – a mode of thought – that aims to aid the human endeavour to persevere in existence. This awareness is absent in the case of the exemplars offered in Scripture and in theological claims about these exemplars. Whereas the philosopher uses the imagination as an aid to reason, in the case of religion it functions as a substitute for reason.

(2012, p. 78)

Gatens proceeds by offering an example of a valuable fiction taken from Spinoza's own work:

The fiction of the model of human nature he introduces in the Preface to Part IV of the *Ethics* is a case in point. This is a good fiction because its function is to guide human striving to live an ethical life and because those who deploy it know that it is a fiction.

(p. 85)

In order to see how fictions can be conducive to autonomy we need to look closer at the passage that Gatens refers to here. Spinoza starts out by explaining how universal notions like perfect and imperfect are human constructs (modes of thinking) that result from the misconception that natural things act on account of ends. From the all-encompassing perspective of Nature, everything is perfect in the sense that nothing could be otherwise. From the limited perspective of a human being, however, things are typically judged according to a preconceived standard, where the measure of perfection is the degree to which something is pleasing to the senses. This, however, tells us nothing about the thing's causes, which would be the only way to understand it adequately. It only tells us something about the perspective of the person passing judgement.

Spinoza offers the example of someone building a house. He argues that 'when we say that habitation was the final cause of this or that house, surely we understand nothing but that a man, because he imagined the convenience of domestic life, had an appetite to build a house. So, habitation, insofar as it is considered as a final cause, is nothing more than this singular appetite' (E4pref). The same, Spinoza contends, goes for moral labels like good and evil. Again, they tell us far less about the thing towards which they are directed, and more about how that thing affects the person passing judgement. Even though these labels are modes of thinking rather than intrinsic values, they can still be valuable to us, however. Spinoza argues that if they are subordinated to the overarching aim of improving our understanding they may assist us in our striving for self-preservation. The reason is that insofar as my judgement over something as being either good or evil reflects how it affects me, it lets me know something useful about myself. It is to this end that Spinoza posits that he will retain and make use of these labels in order to express what aids us and what hinders us from becoming more like the model of human nature. Clearly, then, while good and evil 'indicate nothing positive in things, considered in themselves' (E4pref) they may be used as valuable fictions that can help us determine which things increase our power of acting and which things diminish it. Because our autonomy is tantamount to our power of acting, whatever increases our power of acting also increases our autonomy. The thing that is most useful for increasing our power of acting is – as we have seen earlier – an improved understanding of ourselves and the world. The challenge for educators, then, is to identify fictions that may – like the model of human nature – aid reason rather than substitute it. This calls for a closer look at the role of fictions in an educational context.

Education and the use of valuable fictions

The question, then, is *not* whether the idea of free will deserves a place in education, but whether free will can be utilised as a valuable fiction rather than functioning as a false belief. It is helpful to approach this question by looking at the role of valuable fictions in education in a broader perspective before, in the next chapter, narrowing in on the idea of free will. The question guiding us in this exploration should be this: how can the use of valuable fictions in education be reconciled with the overarching aim of improving our understanding of natural causation so as to increase our autonomy *vis-à-vis* external causes?

We often make use of fictions to guide children in the moral domain. Our rationale for doing so is typically that fictions are believed to make for an effective way of engaging the emotions and for eliciting a desired moral response even though the intellectual reasons motivating this behaviour is deemed too difficult or abstract to understand. We might use parables or captivating fables to communicate a moral lesson. When relating the fable of the tortoise and the hare, for example, it is not that we wish children to believe that wild animals are prone to race one another for sport, but that we seek to convey a moral message through a colourful and compelling fiction that we hope will invoke images that can be favourably applied in other situations in life. While we might use the fable to convey a moral truth, we also have a network of supporting ideas telling us that wild animals do not actually engage in sports and do not talk to one another, ensuring that we do not interpret the fable literally.

The measure of the value of a fiction is the extent to which it moves us to act in ways that are conducive to our striving for self-preservation without inhibiting our overall understanding of ourselves and the world. The motive for using fictions in education, then, is not to provoke blind obedience in children through manipulation, but to help bring about a ‘reasoned and autonomous endorsement of the values we have tried to instil in them with myths and stories’ (Huenemann, 2014, p. 127). As we saw previously, this is different from how fictions might otherwise be used to simply instil a desired behaviour in ignorant people. This entails finding a balance where, as educators, we can use imagery that effectively illustrates and makes available practical knowledge without opening up for a superstitious worldview that will inhibit education in the long run. It is not so much a matter of making a list of which fictions are valuable and which are not, but of making sure that, whatever fictions we use for educational purposes, we take care to make these fictions the servants of reason rather than the other way around.

Recalling P. F. Strawson’s (2013) worry about the undesired effects of a deterministic worldview for our capacity of sustaining ordinary inter-personal attitudes (described in Chapter 1), we are now in a position to see that a distinction between false beliefs and valuable fictions might help resolve this issue. Insofar as false beliefs perpetuate common misconceptions about the nature of the world (as they are connected with other beliefs that help strengthen them), they inhibit our overall striving for self-preservation by inhibiting our striving to understand.

Fictions, however, may be cast in the role as temporary placeholders for knowledge that we lack without claiming to substitute reason. Because they are not connected with other ideas in a way that amounts to a general misrepresentation of the world, they can be utilised so as to allow for ordinary inter-personal attitudes (when these are deemed warranted) without claiming to be able to ground these in an adequate understanding. This way, valuable fictions do not necessarily undermine reactive attitudes, but they also will not sacrifice our striving to understand the world better in order to retain them.

In the next chapter, we will explore the currency of using free will as a valuable fiction in education. The main task of the penultimate chapter is to find out how this can be done without risking the idea of free will becoming a false belief, rendering it a threat to, rather than an asset for, the educational striving for autonomy. This will put us in a position where we can reject free will as a metaphysically flawed notion, while retaining and making use of the psychological force of the idea of free will as a valuable fiction.

Notes

- 1 We might call this non-philosophical brand of libertarianism the *commonsense morality*, in that the general understanding of what it is to be a moral being is typically grounded in the assumption that as rational persons we are free to choose our course of action unless hindered by something external to us.
- 2 G. Strawson puts it like this: ‘Difficult choices, one could say, are the fundamental experiential guarantors of the belief in freedom’ (2010, p. 60).
- 3 As pointed out by Smilansky: ‘Even a hard determinist of goodwill and integrity cannot as it were escape free and responsible choices, in terms of his phenomenological state at the time of choosing’ (2000, p. 206).
- 4 It seems quite clear to me that the compatibilist defence of moral responsibility relies to a great extent upon the psychological importance of the concept. The following conclusion by Baker betrays as much: ‘The importance of moral responsibility – in our lives as moral beings, in our social practices – makes compatibilism desirable’ (2006, p. 325).
- 5 This version of libertarianism is called event-causal libertarianism. Alternatively, libertarians may be agent-causal, in which case a free choice is *a basic act*, where ‘a basic act of an agent is one that she causes but not by any exertion of power or any other act’ (Rowe, 1995, p. 162). This, however, runs up against the problem of having to explain how agents can produce events in a way that is not reducible to event-causation (Bok, 1998, pp. 44–45). Agent causation, in this view, appears to be difficult to explain and to construe as anything but a brute fact.
- 6 Pereboom expresses the incompatibilist claim about origination as follows: ‘(O) If an agent is morally responsible for her deciding to perform an action, then the production of this decision must be something over which the agent has control, and an agent is not morally responsible for the decision if it is produced by a source over which she has no control’ (2001, p. 47).
- 7 The reason for this behaviour, in Waller’s account, is that it helps keep our options open so that we do not simply abandon old solutions because they do not serve us in the situation at hand. Should we abandon it altogether, we might not be able to retain it in other future situations where it might be useful for us again. Having proved persistently disappointing, however, it will eventually be dropped altogether. A naturalised version of autonomy-as-alternatives is what prompts us

to explore new options when our old options prove inadequate. Retaining old options are also valuable, however, and Waller terms this ability *natural authenticity*. Natural authenticity is distinct from the compatibilist version of authenticity which is rooted in a true Self unaffected by contextual conditions. These two abilities – natural autonomy-as-alternatives and natural authenticity – are complementary and where one allows us to venture down new paths if necessary, the other allows us to hold on to behaviours that have proved successful for us in the past. Both, then, are necessary for ensuring our ability to adapt and survive in an ever-changing natural environment.

- 8 It could be argued that this difference is smaller yet than I have made it out to be. It could be conceived in terms of two compatible approaches grounded in the same basic naturalistic understanding of the world. To enhance one's options could be conceived in terms of becoming more aware of one's options and then both approaches would boil down to improving one's understanding. It is not important for my purposes here to settle this issue. What is important is to show that there are viable deterministic options for construing autonomy in ways that do not violate naturalism. I do maintain that Spinoza is particularly interesting from an educational perspective, however, because of his expressed focus on finding ways of bridging the gap between our limited perspective of the world and the external standpoint.
- 9 The notion that free will may be understood in terms of a useful fiction has been suggested and explored by Hans Vaihinger (1924). For our purposes here, I will restrict my discussion of valuable fictions to the Spinozistic version, however. This way I can relate my understanding of fictions to Spinoza's overall epistemological account without risking any unintended shifts in meaning.
- 10 References to Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* (TTP) are to Curley's (Spinoza, 2016) translation.
- 11 References to Spinoza's *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* (TdIE) are to Curley's (Spinoza, 1985) translation.

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6 Free will as a valuable fiction in education

From false belief to valuable fiction

As we saw in the Introduction to this book, one of Spinoza's main philosophical motivations is the combating of established prejudices and superstitions through the careful construction of a naturalistic conception of the world (including human actions and emotions [E3pref]) (E1app). Prejudices and superstitions arise from inadequate ideas. Inadequate ideas, in turn, are what allow for false beliefs. In the historical context of Spinoza's work, power-hungry ecclesiastics manipulating people's hopes and fears by way of their imagination makes for one such example where superstition overrides rationality at the expense of many people's welfare.¹ Even today, we do not have to search very long for examples of dangerous beliefs that have far-reaching consequences for the stability and peace of human societies. Pereboom describes the pervasiveness of false beliefs that have had, and continue to have, detrimental consequences for human societies: 'Countless atrocities have been rationalised by the false belief that an ethnic group is out to destroy one's culture and society. Rationalising expressions of anger by false beliefs is not an unusual practice for human beings' (2001, p. 210). False beliefs are not simply factually false, but because they are presented as brute facts that appeal to the imagination, they are often quite dangerous. Their danger lies in the connection with the espousal of harmful prejudices and accepted superstitions. That is, they can make us do things that we have the intellectual capacity to see is destructive, but that can be motivated by powerful false beliefs appealing to our imagination and wishful thinking.

We learnt from Chapter 3 and the previous chapter, however, that it is not as if we can simply decide to shed our misconceptions and thereby rid ourselves of false beliefs. Because we are limited as cognitive beings, we cannot help but misconceive things. Spinoza's goal then is to reveal our natural limitations and, without underestimating them, finding ways of making the fictions that we refer to as placeholders of knowledge that we lack benefit rather than hamper our striving for self-preservation. One of the things that is most detrimental to us is our tendency to act on passive affects that diminish our striving to persevere. In order to see the dangers of false beliefs, then, we must look at how they affect us. Insofar as freedom of the will (on Spinoza's account) is a false belief, it gives

rise to things that are harmful to us. Placing blame, for example, is a common human tendency that is clearly related to moral anger.² Insofar as placing blame is predicated by moral responsibility, we see that anger relates to the idea of free will and the capacity to do otherwise. Anger, for Spinoza is defined as ‘a desire by which we are spurred, from hate, to do evil to one we hate’ (E3DOA 36). Hate, in turn, is defined as ‘a sadness, accompanied by the idea of an external cause’ (E3DOA 7). Sadness, as we have already seen in Chapter 3, ‘is a man’s passage from a greater to a lesser perfection’ (E3DOA 3). Through this chain of inter-related affects we see that the anger we express through our moral indignation is actually harmful to us. What is worse, because we tend to imitate affects, hatred and sadness are contagious. Fortunately, so are affects of joy.

Because we commonly lack the proper causal explanation for our affective states, Spinoza claims that we rely on our tendency to haphazardly associate certain things with certain affective states.

From the mere fact that we imagine a thing to have some likeness to an object which usually affects the mind with joy or sadness, we love it or hate it, even though that in which the thing is like the object is not the efficient cause of these affects.

(E3p16)

In addition, when we see someone else that we identify as being similar to us being affected by something, for better or worse, we will also be affected. The more we judge the affected person to be like us, the more we will be affected ourselves. ‘If we imagine a thing like us, toward which we have had no affect, to be affected with some affect, we are thereby affected with a like affect’ (E3p27). Moral anger, then, is a form of sadness that spreads in a community, giving rise to reactive and passive attitudes that hinder the striving to persevere of its members.

Since false beliefs arise because of a privation of knowledge we cannot simply override them. If we follow Spinoza’s thinking, however, we might see that expressing our anger is a natural yet harmful way of reacting in relation to a disappointment we do not fully understand. Let me offer a brief example. Suppose we hoped something would happen, but something else in fact did. If the thing that did happen turned out worse than we hoped it would, we tend to become disappointed and angry. In order to sustain the justification of this emotional reaction we need to posit that things could have happened differently. As a way of alleviating our frustration, then, we assume contingency and we assume causal control, allowing us to vent our angry freely. We do this because, generally speaking, we are conscious of our actions but ignorant of their causes (E2p35s). The problem is when our natural way of reacting to our surroundings (which is due to a privation of knowledge), actually stands in the way of our striving for self-preservation. Because our privation of knowledge is a fact, it would not do us any good to feign an understanding that is beyond us. Fictions, then, may be used as a cognitive tool for harbouring our emotions, guiding them in a more productive direction even if we lack the cognitive means to understand the bigger picture.

As we saw in the previous chapter, this is so because as fictions are isolated ideas – ideas that are disconnected from one’s overarching belief system – they can be affirmed without being believed (Steinberg, 2018). The educational question arising from this may be formulated like this: is it possible to harness the psychological force and reap the benefits of the fiction of free will without allowing for the detrimental effects following in the wake of sustaining a false belief in moral responsibility and just deserts? Before exploring the answer to this question in an educational setting, we must first address a different but related question. This question concerns the difference between fictions and illusions as it pertains to the false belief in free will.

Fictions and illusions

Spinoza’s fictions are, as we have seen, wilfully entertained placeholders of knowledge that we lack. In the contemporary free will debate there is a similar – but importantly different – idea of free will as an illusion that, while metaphysically flawed, is deemed crucial for our ability to live in a functioning moral community. Saul Smilansky describes his position *vis-à-vis* the free will problem as the position of *Illusionism*. Smilansky’s notion of an illusion is equivalent to a false belief in that it concerns beliefs that are held as true while the content of the belief is false (2000, p. 146). Smilansky makes a point of working with the concept of illusion rather than the concept of fiction, which he finds inadequate.³ A fiction, Smilansky writes, describes ‘an idea which is false [. . .], is typically known to be false, is focused upon guiding us towards a particular goal, and generally disappears in time as our needs change or as our logical capacity increases’ (p. 147). I have no problem with this definition of a fiction. While fictions are regarded as ‘temporary aids to action,’ Smilansky submits that he will ‘stress the permanence and “necessity” of some illusions’ (ibid.). Fictions and illusions are both grounded in false beliefs, but whereas fictions are wilfully entertained and temporary, illusions are false ideas that are judged especially motivated to sustain. He summarises his understanding of the importance of retaining some valuable illusions as follows:

Our view of ourselves as responsible for our choices and actions, our adherence to the proper moral order, our concern for preventing injustice, our appreciation of the dedication, effort, and sacrifice of others, our capacity for self-respect – these and more significantly *depend* upon illusion. It is not that we should delude ourselves willingly, let alone hold the required beliefs while knowing that they are illusory, but that, fortunately, these enabling illusions are in place. [. . .] We can see that illusion is thus positive or ‘functional’ (First Stage of argument), that it operates today (Second Stage of argument), and that, on balance, it would be a good thing if it continued to exist in a manner akin to that which it possesses today (Third Stage of argument).

(Smilansky, 2000, pp. 288–289, emphasis in original)

Smilansky argues that while hard determinism may be a metaphysically credible position, it would be unwise to do away with the compatibilist claim to moral responsibility (even if it does not hold up to philosophical scrutiny regarding origination or ultimate control) because doing so would jeopardise ‘the Community of Responsibility.’ Even if this claim is ultimately grounded in the illusion of free will, to uphold this illusion indefinitely is preferable to accepting the potential moral damage resulting from a wholly deterministic worldview. This amounts to a dualistic framework (what Smilansky calls Fundamental Dualism) where some core deterministic insights are defended while some important compatibilist intuitions are retained. Smilansky’s concession to compatibilism is articulated by way of an example concerning three triplet brothers (A, B and C) and two cases of shoplifting (pp. 95–100). A and C shoplift while B does not. C, however, is a kleptomaniac. Smilansky argues that while A and B are both morally responsible – because they are capable of rational reflection – C is not, as his capacity for rational deliberation is overridden by the irrational compulsion to steal. A, then, having decided to steal in spite of his capacity to deliberate, is blameworthy for the act of shoplifting in a sense that C is not and cannot be.

From a Spinozistic perspective, however, it is not at all clear *in what sense* A is more blameworthy than C. Insofar as stealing is a self-destructive act (as it will likely result in negative repercussions for A⁴), and insofar as we are incapable of acting in self-destructive ways when we act autonomously (E4p20s), we must conclude that A and C are both moved to act by passive affects (albeit in different ways because they are differently constituted). While Smilansky claims that all three brothers are causally determined beings, C – because he is a kleptomaniac – is somehow significantly more determined than his brothers are. To introduce a gradual scale of determinism in this sense is problematic as it appears impossible to establish when, more precisely, one passes the line from being determined in a more general sense to being determined to the extent that one is no longer to be held morally responsible. The categorical division between degrees of determinism therefore appears arbitrary and inexplicable.

On Smilansky’s view, accounts of hard determinism are overly simplistic as they do not allow for a gradual scale where some agents are blameworthy and some are not (depending on their ability to exert control over their actions). From a Spinozistic perspective, however, it is not very complicated to determine which actions are autonomous and which are not. Whichever actions are adequately understood to be conducive to the agent’s self-preservation are autonomous and therefore ethically sound or morally responsible. Actions that are not, are always passively induced as they result from a confused understanding of what will strengthen the striving to persevere in being. That is, since we cannot not strive for self-preservation (as this striving is our essence [E3p7]), anything that inhibits our striving must be alien to us. This leads to the counterintuitive conclusion that we are in fact responsible for our actions when we understand them adequately (to what extent this is epistemically possible is debatable however), but we are never responsible for acts that are passively induced.

For Smilansky, the heart of the problem is that ‘from the ultimate perspective [i.e. the external standpoint] all people, whatever their efforts and sacrifices, are morally equal: i.e. there cannot be any means of generating “real” moral value’ (2000, p. 163). This is not necessarily true, however. Spinoza’s ethical theory helps us see that we can deny intrinsic values such as ‘Good’ and ‘Evil’ without denying the universal validity of the claim that whatever aids our striving for self-preservation is good for us and whatever hinders it is bad. What we have, on Spinoza’s account, is a theory that denounces human exceptionalism, where the perspective of the finite mode is illegitimately put in place of the all-encompassing perspective of God or Nature, while retaining the importance of our ability to judge what is good for us and to distinguish this from what is harmful. Common moral values, from this perspective, are very real and very useful as they help us determine what is good for us insofar as we benefit from the same things. Unlike on Smilansky’s account, however, they are not dependent upon an external lawgiver. Smilansky’s model presupposes some kind of external lawgiver (however conceived) as this would seem to be the only way to generate ‘real’ moral values beyond the subjective predispositions of individual humans.

Ultimately, Smilansky’s argument for upholding what he believes to be the necessary illusion of free will rests on the same deep worry as R. S. Peters’ concerns about allowing determinism to be used as ‘a universal get-out’ (discussed in Chapter 4). Smilansky asks this question: ‘The central question is whether we want to proceed towards a *general* non-libertarian framework, say, to educate our children against prevailing Core Conception beliefs with the assumed libertarian foundation’ (p. 165, emphasis in original). Recalling Peters’ concern, we see the similarity clearly in the following quote from Smilansky:

[H]ow, for instance, can children develop a sense of responsibility if there is a readily available and culturally acceptable possibility of saying, for *every* given act or omission, ‘well, ultimately I could not after all have done anything else, given that the world was as it was’? A society imbued with libertarian beliefs might be able to prevent significant ‘opting out’ from responsibility by individuals, but what is endangered here is not deviance but the norm, the very social categories themselves.

(Smilansky, 2000, p. 166, emphasis in original)

It is important not to underestimate this worry. It would be all too easy to promote an idealistic conception of education as nothing above or beyond the detached and morally disinterested transferal of objective truth, whatever the social consequences. My proposal, however, is that Spinoza stands to offer a different vantage point from where to attack the problem in a nuanced way. Spinoza’s vantage point allows me to formulate a theory that acknowledges the social and psychological force of the libertarian belief in free will, but instead of concluding that this belief should be endorsed and sustained indefinitely, it suggests that while free will may be a necessary false belief, it may also be utilised as a valuable fiction in education. As such, we remain realistic regarding the limited

capacity of human cognition, but optimistic regarding the personal and social benefits of moderating passive affects such as moral anger and resentment. It also recognises the important difference between motivating a moral framework by fear of punishment (ultimately rooted in ignorance) and motivating it by the educational desire to become relatively autonomous (rooted in the fundamental rational striving to understand the world better).

In a letter to Jacob Ostens, Spinoza portrays the person who obeys moral precepts out of fear of punishment:

He finds nothing in virtue itself, or in understanding, which delights him, and he would prefer to live according to the impulse of his affects, if one thing did not stand in his way: he fears punishment. So he abstains from evil actions, and obeys the divine commandments, like a slave, reluctantly and with a vacillating heart.

(Ep. 43, p. 387)

This may be an outwardly moral way of living according to the standards of society, but it is far from free. For someone striving for freedom, in contrast, ‘the reward of virtue is virtue itself, whereas the punishment of folly and weakness is folly itself’ (Ep. 43, p. 386). The ethical striving, then, is a striving for a life of virtue, which, as we have seen, is a life where we are responsible for our actions insofar as we understand them adequately.⁵ When we are moved to act by external causes, however, we undergo passive affects of which we have only inadequate knowledge and are therefore not responsible for. Because we are always, to some degree, passively determined, it is called for to briefly review Spinoza’s understanding of the relation between reason and the emotions and to situate this discussion in an educational context. This appears necessary if we are to be able to answer the question of whether fictions can be productively utilised as placeholders for an adequate understanding of nature.

Reason and the emotions

The highest good to strive for, according to Spinoza, is an improved understanding of the world.⁶ In the Appendix to Part 4 of the *Ethics*, Spinoza proposes that

the ultimate end of the man who is led by reason, i.e., his highest Desire, by which he strives to moderate all the others, is that by which he is led to conceive adequately both himself and all things that can fall under his understanding.

Note, however, that this presupposes someone who is already ‘led by reason’ as it were. As we have seen, most people have only a confused understanding of what is conducive to their striving to persevere and so they may very well strive for things other than an increased understanding, believing these things – such as wealth or reputation – to be conducive to their happiness. As with LeBuffe’s optimistic nutritionist (discussed in Chapter 3), however, people may need help

to distinguish short-term benefits from long-term benefits, as short-term benefits are often detrimental for them in the longer perspective. Aspiring for wealth, for example, often breeds jealousy and hatred against those more successful. Jealousy and hatred, in turn, are passive affects that hinder our striving for self-preservation. It would be ill advised, then, to simply assume that people naturally strive for a better understanding of themselves and the world even though, ontologically speaking, they all strive to persevere in being. Because ‘human power is very limited and infinitely surpassed by the power of external causes’ (E4app), the striving for freedom is necessarily a gradual process where being able to distinguish passions that are less harmful or gradually more beneficial than other passions is a central concern. This entails that working with our passions and inadequate ideas (rather than trying, in vain, to suppress them using reason as a weapon) is an important part of re-educating our desires (Ravven, 1990).

Education is a process through which people may come to see the value of an increased understanding of the world. That is, education is not just, or even primarily, about acquiring more accurate information about things in the world, but about learning to desire this knowledge as a means for attaining a state of *eudaimonia*. Because, as we have seen, people’s general understanding of the world is always filtered through their subjective experiences and embodied perspectives, an important aspect of becoming educated concerns being able to distinguish between how something makes me feel and what, more precisely, causes that feeling. Sometimes we assume the cause to reside in the thing we encounter, when in reality we ascribe it to the thing in question because we associate it with a similar experience in our past (by way of the imitation of affects). This makes it important to understand more about how we are affected by things in the world, not because we can insulate ourselves from damaging external influences, but because we can begin to predict and avoid some of its most detrimental effects on us. While passive affects are never sources of adequate knowledge, they are an unavoidable fact of life for finite modes like human beings. This does not necessarily mean that passive affects are always bad for us however. They may be helpful insofar as they counter more dangerous passive affects. LeBuffe extrapolates:

A passion cannot contribute to a mind’s activity by giving it another adequate idea: passions are never adequate ideas. A passion can, however, restrain another passion that afflicts the mind. So passion can contribute to the activity of the mind in the second way, by restraining passions that afflict it.

(LeBuffe, 2009, p. 213)

Our ability to reason and our emotional responses to the world are fundamentally interwoven and we learn about things by being affected by them, sometimes in a positive direction and sometimes in a negative direction. To a degree, we can learn to foresee our emotional responses to things in a way that allows us to moderate our responses even though we lack the knowledge necessary for fully understanding them. Using valuable fictions in education may be conceived

in terms of a concrete strategy for wilfully employing our emotional responses to guide us in a direction that is beneficial for us rather than allowing them to manipulate us in ways that we do not perceive and therefore cannot understand. It thereby affords us a degree of autonomy from external causes without making us out to be *causa sui*.

In light of this, it is important not to misconstrue Spinoza's rationalism so that it takes on the form of a Stoic overestimation of our ability to control our emotional responses to the world. It bears repeating that we are *always* to some extent passively constituted, and that part of what makes us into what we are is that we are limited in our understanding and largely dependent upon our imagination to compensate for an innate privation of knowledge. To pretend otherwise isn't helpful. At the same time, it would be equally problematic to assume that our imagination allows for a privileged conception of the world. In fact, part of what Spinoza takes great pains to illustrate is that when we rely heavily on our imagination we often mistake our subjective judgements about things for their intrinsic qualities. On Spinoza's account, natural disasters such as earthquakes or floods are as perfect as anything else in nature and just because something is inimical to my striving to persevere does not mean that it is intrinsically evil or bad. A psychological by-product of the tendency to project our subjective judgements onto things themselves is that we become disappointed and angry whenever things in the world do not bend to our will or behave the way we expect them to. This is emotionally taxing, especially as it frequently turns out that we lack the ability to control these matters. The emotional price we pay motivates the educational focus on increasing our understanding of how we are affected by the world. This way, we may shift focus from trying, in vain, to control things that will always be hopelessly beyond our control, to understanding more about how we function and what the limits of our autonomy are. As we saw in Chapter 4, from this perspective moral education would be less focused on training children in personal decision-making and more focused on helping children understand what they benefit from and how to distinguish this from what is harmful (yet seemingly beneficial).

It is important to consider degrees of harm with regards to the use of fictions in education. A fiction may be inherently false but still less harmful than another false belief. It is better therefore to exploit the imagination so as to counter harmful illusions by less harmful fictions in order to promote the overall striving for self-preservation. Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd explain the dynamic relation between different kinds of fictions *vis-à-vis* the striving to persevere and to become relatively autonomous as follows:

The wise mind struggles to replace the illusions which block its thriving – the fictions through which those intent on domination exert power by manipulating passions of fear and hope – with new fictions which better serve the effort to persist in being, individually and collectively, as thriving unities of mind and body.

(Gatens & Lloyd, 1999, p. 38)

In an educational context, the notion that false beliefs are connected with varying degrees of harm entails that there are two important components to the process. First, we must endeavour to identify especially harmful or dangerous beliefs that would warrant the preemptive use of fictions. Second, we need to suggest less harmful fictions that can be productively put to use in education in order to thwart the threat of those beliefs deemed especially harmful. What might be added to the quote from Gatens and Lloyd is that the less-than-wise mind – the mind in need of education – needs help with identifying harmful beliefs and with replacing or complementing these with new fictions that are relatively more valuable for furthering the overall striving to persevere. Importantly, it is also to the benefit of the wise that the passive impulses of the less-than-wise are tempered by fictions so that the wise may continue to seek knowledge without risking harm from those who are determined to act mainly by passions. To exploit the imagination of the less-than-wise in order to check dangerous passive responses entails making use of ‘memorable precepts that help to constitute one’s conception of a right manner of living [*recta ratio vivendi*]; such precepts are well suited to guiding the minds of imagination-driven agents in the imprecise art of living’ (Steinberg, 2014, p. 179). We will have cause to interrogate the seeming tension between the emotional manipulation of the imagination and the educational striving for autonomy – as well as the educational role of Spinoza’s dictates of reason⁷ – in the next and final chapter of this book.

As with the example of competing and incommensurable ideas about the sun (one more scientifically valid and the other emotionally and phenomenologically powerful yet clearly inadequate) discussed in Chapter 3, it is not that our understanding of the unlikelihood of the truth of libertarian free will will automatically replace our false belief in freedom of the will. We may come to this understanding intellectually, but we will still experience our intuitive sense of agency and capacity for decision-making in a powerful way.⁸ Rather than confirming and endorsing the false belief in origination, however, education can work to increase our intellectual understanding without underestimating the psychological force of the idea of free will. We might say that it is better to have access to two competing ideas than to be left wholly at the mercy of a powerful false belief that renders us highly susceptible to harmful emotional manipulation. Taken together, these ideas can make it so that we can begin to question our tacit assumptions about the benefits of free will without denying our deep desire to seek refuge from grave psychological threats by way of the emotional comfort of false beliefs. This way we can question taken-for-granted values such as personal success and just deserts and begin to explore other values such as the ethical goods of equanimity (arising from the insight that it makes little sense to live a life haunted by regrets about past choices) and of taking part in a community based on a joint striving for self-preservation. Because we cannot fully compensate for our innate privation of knowledge about the causal nexus that determines us, we need to make use of fictions that help us act morally⁹ even when the actual reasons behind this escape our grasp. In addition, valuable fictions can help us emotionally by allowing us to provisionally retain a sense of meaning that is at bottom grounded in the false

belief in free will.¹⁰ But fictions are only valuable to the extent that they moderate other fictions that stand to cause us more harm. I submit that the endeavour to combat harmful false beliefs with valuable fictions that appeal to our imagination and emotional desires is an educational task that deserves far more attention than it has been given thus far.

Two illustrative examples

At this point it will be useful to look at a couple of illustrations of how valuable fictions can be employed in education to moderate harmful beliefs and to further the striving to persevere even though we lack the knowledge to adequately understand why. The first illustration concerns the negative aspect of mitigating the dangers of moral anger while the second illustration concerns the positive aspect of increasing human freedom and autonomy through the strengthening of community and the destabilising of the intuitive sense of agent-causal self, grounded in the false belief in a libertarian free will. Let us look at the first illustration.

In an educational context, we can endeavour to uncover and understand some of the harmful effects of the pervasive false belief in a libertarian free will, focusing specifically on the effects of moral anger. Looking at instructive historical and contemporary examples of how moral anger is being used to motivate arbitrary sanctions and punishments can help us see more clearly how our sense of morality is typically underpinned by passive emotional responses to things we do not fully understand. Looking at how moral anger connects with deep-rooted prejudices, we can come to understand how harmful affects like vengeance and bigotry are perpetuated and often habitually passed down from one generation to the next. Having identified the dangers of moral anger we can then endeavour to introduce a more beneficial fiction to counter it. This could be traditional moral fictions such as ‘love thy neighbour’ or modern liberal fictions such as ‘the inviolability of human rights.’ These fictions have the benefit of tapping into less harmful affects such as love and tolerance to counter those of vengeance and bigotry. Over time, even these more beneficial fictions may be revealed as temporary fictions and placed under the scrutiny of the critical gaze as part of the long-term endeavour to improve our understanding of ourselves and the world.

The purpose of the first illustration is to offer a useful educational framework for mitigating the harms of moral anger through the considered use of valuable fictions. Insofar as moral anger is an effect of a libertarian understanding of free will, the educational task involves coming to see how the belief in free will intertwines with harmful passive affects that are actually counterproductive to the development of autonomy. Because these passive affects are deemed especially emotionally powerful and because the tacit belief in a libertarian free will is taken to be pervasive, valuable fictions – acting as counter-measures that can appeal to the imagination – are introduced in an endeavour to moderate the detrimental effects of the false belief. The fictions employed to counter the false belief in free will are treated as temporary placeholders of knowledge, negotiating a middle

position between a psychologically powerful yet metaphysically unsound understanding of human agency and an external position that is metaphysically persuasive yet difficult to encompass psychologically and emotionally. This will open up a path for a deterministic understanding of the world while leaving enough room for a conception of personal autonomy rooted in our phenomenological experience of being in the world as agents of change. On a similar note, Galen Strawson suggests that there may be benefits of ‘local erosions’ in our commitment to certain reactive attitudes, where we might seek to retain aspects of our natural beliefs about human agency while being sceptical about other, less beneficial, facets (2010, p. 77).¹¹ The second illustration is focused on promoting autonomy and freedom without sacrificing the educational goal of striving to understand the world more adequately. Let us look at the second illustration.

Education is about learning to deliberate, but also about learning to perceive the limits of our causal efficacy. Free will can be used as a valuable fiction to balance these two seemingly contradictory aspects of education. Revealing the belief in free will to be grounded in a useful psychological constitution rather than a convincing metaphysical framework allows for some of the advantages to be retained while some of the more harmful assumptions may be debunked. Our ordinary understanding of human freedom and autonomy relies on an understanding of ourselves as something beyond mere spiritual automatons. This allows us to set up common goals and to strive for continuously improving ourselves and our social institutions. To retain this sense of agency is important for our sense of self-worth and our ability to function in a moral community. On the other hand, overestimating our capacity as autonomous agents tends to espouse an understanding of ourselves as a dominion within a dominion and to underestimate the extent to which we are determined by other things in the world. Education needs to make use of the valuable fiction of free will insofar as this allows us to harness the emotional power tied up with our sense of being active agents in our daily lives. At the same time, it needs to balance this fiction with a more realistic conception of our causal efficacy so that it can protect us from our unrealistic expectations of ourselves as the sole authors of our actions.

The purpose of the second educational illustration is to demonstrate the importance of grounding our sense of freedom and autonomy in a more realistic conception of what it is to be a human being. While freedom and autonomy are useful concepts for describing the joy of becoming empowered in one’s striving to persevere in being, they are also problematic insofar as they have typically been associated with a kind of freedom from constraint that proves impossible to live up to. When freedom and autonomy are understood in a naturalistic sense, they can be applied in a way that is tailored to the needs of individual people, but when they are taken to reflect intrinsic values, they can easily be turned into instruments of oppression. This, of course, is a delicate act of balance as the use of fictions in education invites inadequate explanations (even though the inadequate explanations offered are deemed less harmful than sustaining false beliefs as they are acknowledged as temporary). It becomes important therefore to ensure that the fictions used are relatively beneficial *vis-à-vis* more harmful fictions, so that they serve the purpose of educating the desires. Education can help illustrate how

freedom can prove a valuable fiction for conceptualising human communities that enable people to strive collectively, but it can also illustrate the dangers of assuming human freedom to amount to a universal value insofar as the striving to persevere is always conditioned by an innate perspectivism. We need valuable fictions to help us conceptualise a common world that is worth striving for, but we must not forget that these fictions are placeholders of knowledge that we lack. We can study examples of past human endeavours to organise in peaceful and flourishing societies, but we must remember to note that these examples will always be filtered through someone's imagination and that they reflect an ideal community from the particular perspective of its authors. A useful fiction for bringing people together in a joint striving can easily turn into blind dogmatism. In order to avoid this, educational fictions must be such that they are motivated by their ability to counter other fictions deemed more harmful and they must be temporary so that they can be openly challenged and replaced when they are being disguised as neutral proclamations of truth.

In sum, both of these illustrations of the educational benefits of valuable fictions are meant to demonstrate how fictions about human freedom need to be balanced so that they can offer a sense of agency and provide useful images of flourishing human communities as well as check dangerous tendencies for moral anger and temper the overestimation of our choice-making abilities. As such, they are meant to illustrate how the fiction of free will and deliberation can be made to serve the ethical goal of moderating harmful passions and improving the understanding. Valuable fictions serve a dual purpose insofar as they may counter more harmful affects as well as aid in the overall striving to persevere, relatively speaking. They are not, however, a substitute for adequate ideas, but may act as temporary placeholders in the specific cases where adequate ideas are deemed too difficult for most to attain. As such, the fiction of free will may allow for an acknowledgement of the powerful cognitive phenomenology of free will without standing in the way of those who wish to pursue a more realistic understanding of the human being as a finite mode among other finite modes in nature. In doing so, fictions may offer stepping-stones towards a gradually more adequate understanding of the world. It is the task of education to offer valuable fictions and to clear the path for those who seek to improve their understanding.

The complexity of natural causation and the educational dream of unpredictability

The assumed relation between education and the conception of human freedom as the freedom to do otherwise makes determinism problematic for education. If determinism is true, how can people change into something better, something new? The postmodern doubt about the success of the scientific revolution has led many educational theorists to abandon the Enlightenment project and its dream of a rational kind of freedom. In hindsight, it may seem that modern science has brought us little more than the illusion that we could bring order to the world by labelling it systematically. Abandoning the kind of freedom promised by science

and reason, many educational theorists turned instead to the radical freedom of the unpredictable and the untamed:

Foundational knowledge, given its self-understanding that it discovers the truth of an independently existing ‘reality,’ enshrines predictability and control at its very heart. The postmodern questioning of this enshrining means that education cannot be considered part of a predictable ‘reality’ and therefore can neither control nor be controlled. With this unpredictability, education can no longer readily function either as a means of reproducing society or as an instrument in large-scale social engineering. Educational sites would neither be determining nor determined. It is in this sense that education becomes limitless both in time and space, potentially escaping the epistemological, political and physical boundaries imposed on it by modernity.

(Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 211)

As much as the stock Enlightenment dream of predictability overestimates the epistemological capacities of the human mind, postmodern scepticism confuses the cognitive limitations of the human mind for the ontological make of the world. Both ends of the spectrum are marks of hubris, one in its assumption that the human mind is afforded a uniquely privileged perspective on the world, and the other in its assumption that just because we lack the means for understanding natural causation, it somehow does not constrain us. Both positions lead to gross simplifications. Education may either be conceived in terms of a thoroughly predictable process whereby knowledge is transferred as effectively as possible from one subject to another, or, in terms of a mysterious activity where anything might happen and where no standard of knowledge can be assumed without jeopardising the educational dream of unpredictability. These are equally romantic notions tailored to fit the need for human exceptionalism. They symbolise a kind of freedom that is ultimately a freedom from the constraints of the natural world. On Spinoza’s account, however, to be human is to be naturally constrained. And to become free is to gradually become aware and accepting of these constraints. To aspire for a kind of freedom that is unattainable, on the other hand, is to submit to the bondage of the imagination. Disappointment and resentment are likely to follow.

At the same time – as stressed several times in this book already – it is important not to underestimate the complexity of natural causation. The tendency to espouse a false belief in free will would surely not be so powerful if we did not lack the cognitive ability to encompass the full causal nexus of our actions. The question, then, is whether we have to settle for an either/or kind of situation. I submit that we do not. I am suggesting that it is in fact fully possible to grant our inability to adequately understand the full causal nexus of our actions, without submitting to indefinite Illusionism. Education is where we might seek to negotiate a space between the detached position of causal determinism and the experiential appeal of false beliefs. There are multiple layers to this set up however. On the one hand, for the safety of our moral communities, we most likely

need to rely on the fiction of free will in order to be safeguarded from irrational attacks (both internal and external). On the other hand, these fictions cannot be allowed to turn into perpetual illusions lest they may be used as weapons against those who aspire to understand themselves and nature more adequately. Again we see the two-fold purpose of the valuable fiction. First, it serves to allow for an acknowledgement of the experiential sense of causal efficacy without giving in freely to dangerous affects like moral anger and hatred. Second, it protects the endeavour of those who aspire to increase their understanding of natural causation despite its many inherent challenges.

In an educational context, there is another important reason for preferring the use of valuable fictions – as temporary placeholders of truth – to that of indefinitely maintained illusions. The reason is that insofar as illusions are recognised as false beliefs that are collectively entertained and sustained, they come dangerously close to being lies knowingly used to manipulate children and students (notwithstanding the validity of the purpose) into behaving in certain ways rather than others. Using lies in education, for whatever reason, appears to run counter to the educational aim of promoting autonomy. As David Carr notes, ‘the idea of teaching involves that of making people *better* – in some way, one can only suppose, that is at odds with spreading lies, prejudice and intolerance’ (2003, p. 33, emphasis in original). This makes it important to balance the use of fictions in education very carefully so as not to end up on a slippery slope of indoctrination and manipulation. Whereas fictions are recognised as necessary placeholders of knowledge that we lack – i.e. knowledge about something of which we are uncertain – illusions are described by Smilansky as false beliefs that need to be perpetuated for the sake of the preservation of some of our basic moral assumptions. Recalling Hume’s warning (mentioned in Chapter 1, note 5) against bending philosophical inquiry to the demands of either religion or morality, we might add that education is another area of the human social world where it may be called for to proceed carefully when adjusting our requirements *vis-à-vis* the virtues of truthfulness and honesty. This is so not least because we do not simply want children to learn to behave in certain ways, we also (and perhaps more importantly) want them to understand *why* they should behave in certain ways.

Because human beings are cognitively limited by their very nature, there is no sense in which we can suppose that the full understanding required for grasping the causal nexus determining human actions would ever be available to us. We might speculate what it would mean if this limitation was not in place, but this does not detract from the fact that it involves a radical shift in our understanding of what it is to be human.¹² A consequence of this is that the fiction of free will is going to continue to play an important part in education however we conceive it. What we appear to end up with is a seemingly conflicting situation where education, on the one hand, needs to ensure that the improvement of the understanding is being promoted as a central education aim, and, on the other hand, that children and students are fostered into adhering to common moral precepts whether they fully understand the reasons for this or not. It is not always clear then, given the role of free will as a fiction in education, that the improvement

of the understanding and moral formation always go hand in hand. On Spinoza's account, this tension is most tangible in relation to the security of the state *vis-à-vis* the freedom of mind of the individual. In his *Political Treatise* he writes:

It doesn't make any difference to the security of the state in what spirit men are led to administer matters properly, provided they do administer them properly. For freedom of mind, *or* strength of character, is a private virtue. But the virtue of the state is security.

(*TP* I, 6/p. 506)

This is a tension that in many ways mirrors the tension between an intellectual understanding of the impossibility of genuine self-causation and the phenomenological experience of being an agent in a deep sense. As G. Strawson puts it:

A person may *theoretically* fully accept that he, or she, is wholly a product of his or her heredity and environment – many of us do – and yet, in everyday life, have *nothing like* the kind of self-conception that is here required of the genuine incompatibilist determinist (non-self-determinationist).

(2010, pp. 85–86, emphasis in original)

While the gradual understanding of one's limitations as a causal agent is beneficial for one's burgeoning understanding of oneself and the world, it may very well be that the security of the state hinges on the provisional acceptance of the libertarian fiction of free will. Because most people have limited opportunities of cultivating a relatively adequate understanding of themselves and the world – as this takes a long time and requires persistent work – educators cannot simply focus on the few that will be more readily equipped for this task. Educators must also ensure that the security of the state is upheld, and this, it seems, requires the use of fictions that appeal to the imagination of most people. It is from this point of view that Spinoza concludes that '[a]cademies supported at the expense of the State are instituted not so much to develop native abilities as to keep them in check' (*TP* VIII, 49/p. 588). We might say that a precondition for the individual's improvement of the understanding is the relative safety ensured by valuable fictions, keeping the irrational and passive responses of the multitude in check.

We have passed then from an understanding of free will as a false belief that by underpinning the aspects of education that concern moral formation, steer focus from an adequate understanding of the world to an inadequate conception of humans – as a dominion within a dominion, with the ability to act as causal originators in a way that runs counter to the regularities of nature – to an understanding of free will as a valuable fiction that can moderate passive affects without legitimising a superstitious worldview. Education, on my view, can come to play an important role for this transformation. What is important is to not underestimate the power of the idea of free will on a phenomenological and emotional level. Understood in terms of a valuable fiction, however, educators and students can make use of the power of the idea of free will, without allowing

it to connect with other ideas in a way that turns it into a pervasive false belief rather than a valuable fiction.¹³ Insofar as education – to a considerable extent – turns on the use of valuable fictions to compensate for a privation of knowledge, it is well equipped for such an endeavour. Children who are just beginning their education are often largely determined by their imagination – as their understanding of the world is just beginning to take form – and so they are susceptible to imaginative ideas that can stimulate their curiosity to understand more about the world. Should they be perpetually kept in the dark, however, they may turn into outwardly moral people, but their sense of morality is always contingent upon their fear of sanctions and punishments. Therefore, it is important to construe the false belief in free will as a temporary fiction, to be used and exploited for the purposes of education, but not to be indefinitely maintained for the purposes of morality.

In the next and final chapter, we will revisit the main arguments put forth in this book and we will take stock of the practical consequences for education. It is my hope that this will present a convincing case for an account of education for autonomy without taking recourse to the seeming comfort of the false belief in free will. The argument here is that while this comfort may appear to offer a degree of relief from the threat of determinism, it is only a short-term solution to a problem that – if ignored – will turn out to have much more detrimental effects in a long-term perspective. The purpose is therefore not just to illustrate the potential benefits of understanding autonomy in a way that agrees with the general outlook of causal determinism, but to point to the long-term dangers of perpetuating a tacit belief in the folk psychology of free will *qua* libertarianism.

Notes

- 1 In Chapter 7 of the *TTP*, Spinoza writes: ‘We see that almost everyone peddles his own inventions as the word of God, concerned only to compel others to think as he does, under the pretext of religion. [2] We see that the Theologians have mainly been anxious to twist their own inventions and fancies out of the Sacred Texts, to fortify them with divine authority. There’s nothing they do with less scruple, or greater recklessness, than interpret Scripture *or* the mind of the Holy Spirit’ (*TTP* VII, 1–2/p. 170).
- 2 From Spinoza’s perspective, there is nothing specifically moral about moral anger. Anger is an affect that may or may not be connected with moral questions, but there is no sense in which we could categorically distinguish moral anger from other kinds of anger.
- 3 Smilansky contrasts his notion of illusion specifically to Vaihinger’s (1924) notion of fiction. He identifies three main differences between his understanding of illusion and Vaihinger’s account of fiction. The first is that Vaihinger gives fictions unlimited scope, the second that Vaihinger presents a limited account of truth, and the third is that fictions are temporary (Smilansky, 2000, p. 147). It is important to note that while there are overlaps between Vaihinger’s and Spinoza’s respective accounts of fiction, they are not identical.
- 4 While there might be some short-term benefits to stealing in terms of satisfying the immediate desire of whatever is stolen or in terms of temporarily increasing one’s social status in a group, there is – generally speaking – a greater degree of long-term disadvantages with a life of crime.

- 5 It is important to note that this does not mean that in contemplating our actions we can assume responsibility for them retrospectively. It simply means that insofar as we understand the causes of our actions we also understand the effects that follow from them. In understanding the effects that follow from our actions, we cause them (insofar as explicability and causation are coextensive for Spinoza) and so we become automatically responsible for them.
- 6 For a detailed discussion on Spinoza's understanding of the highest good and how this relates to perfection, happiness and the notion of an end, see Carriero (2017).
- 7 Spinoza's dictates of reason may be understood in terms of 'practical principles for promoting our power' (Kisner, 2011, p. 112). The dictates of reason are found in Part 4 of the *Ethics*, most notably in E4p18s where Spinoza asserts that reason 'demands that everyone love himself, seek his own advantage, what is really useful to him, want what will really lead a man to greater perfection, and absolutely, that everyone should strive to preserve his own being as far as he can.'
- 8 At the same time, we may argue that much of our experience speaks against origination. Honderich, for example, uses the everyday experience of determinism as a point of departure for arguing against a libertarian understanding of free will: 'All my experience goes against real mystery. You are the same, are you not? Have any candles lit themselves spontaneously in your life? This belief that all events in our lives are effects, our greatest induction, the largest proposition of human experience, seems to me at least as important to the question of the truth of general determinism as anything else' (2011, p. 444).
- 9 I use the term 'morally' in the conventional sense here, meaning the common moral rules that we have established to ensure the safety of the community. On Spinoza's view, these moral rules are coextensive with what is truly ethical insofar as we need to be protected from outside harm in order to be able to pursue freedom of mind (which is what furthers our striving to persevere).
- 10 This is connected to the notion that the false belief in free will allows us in some ways to retain a stable sense of self. G. Strawson, for example, suggests that the biggest threat of embracing determinism is not against our inter-personal relations, but against the stability of our self-understanding. He writes: 'The sleights of mind begin because the biggest problems raised by the apparent demands of reason concerns oneself. Trying to think through the consequences of these demands, it seems that one risks thinking oneself out of existence, as a *mental someone*' (2010, p. 82, emphasis in original).
- 11 G. Strawson takes this middle position to follow from the observation that while reactive attitudes appear to come natural to us, so does a certain degree of scepticism of free will. He writes: 'It is in our nature to be deeply committed to the reactive attitudes. But it is also in our nature to take determinism (non-self-determinability) to pose a serious problem for the notions of freedom and responsibility' (2010, p. 78). I understand this middle position to correspond roughly with the point of departure for my educational treatment of valuable fictions as presented in this chapter.
- 12 For a discussion on the implications of a possible future scenario where knowledge insertion is a real option for education, see Tillson (forthcoming).
- 13 Insofar as most people in general are passively determined there is no reason to think that educators are somehow immune against dangerous passions. It would clearly be a mistake to assume that educators are somehow naturally privileged in this sense. One might hope that most educators have a more adequate understanding of the world, relatively speaking, than their students, but it would be too hasty to assume that their capacity as educators somehow guarantees this. It may be better, then, to suppose that educators and students – to different

degrees – need help in re-educating their desires and that they need to be guaranteed the safety to do this by a stable political structure via public educational institutions.

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7 Education for autonomy without free will

Summing up the main arguments of the book

As indicated in the Introduction to this book, one of the problems with grounding theory and practice in assumptions that are inadequately understood is that it severely hampers the ability to critique and re-evaluate the theoretical framework that one is embedded in. This indicates the importance of addressing these tacit assumptions without being overly charitable. Because teachers are often dependent upon ‘commonsense’ when framing their worldview, ‘they are often in the grip of discredited theory even when they do not know that they are’ (Winch, 2017, p. 124). As Winch goes on to argue: ‘There are all kinds of practices and propositions that teachers are certain about (in a subjective sense of ‘certainty,’ i.e., as an attitude or state of mind), which may unfortunately nevertheless not be true or which may even be conceptually muddled’ (pp. 140–141). This is not to say that all practicing teachers need to (or should) be trained philosophers, but to point to the important task of philosophers of education in terms of interrogating commonsensical yet pervasive beliefs about education, and, by so doing, inviting participants (beyond the confines of philosophy) to a critical understanding of the conceptual framework of education. I have argued that the folk-psychological belief in free will makes for one such pervasive belief that informs practice and that grounds theory in a muddled conceptual framework.

In response to the problem of grounding education in commonsensical beliefs, I have endeavoured to scrutinise the concept of free will in the context of educational theory. Having identified the concept of free will as typically belonging to a loosely defined compatibilist tradition, I have argued that this understanding is ultimately grounded in a libertarian notion where a free will entails true causal control and origination. Because this notion is difficult to defend metaphysically, I have argued that it would make more sense to ground education in a naturalistic understanding of the will, without underestimating the psychological force of the phenomenology of the freedom to do otherwise. With regards to the phenomenology of free will, I have argued that it would be better to treat the idea of a free will as a necessary yet false belief. It is necessary as it results from an awareness of volitions that we cannot explain causally. It is false insofar as it acts as a placeholder for knowledge that we lack due to an

innate privation of knowledge, which is due to a natural cognitive limitation. Even if we come to see the shortcomings of a libertarian understanding of a free will, metaphysically speaking, we have no choice but to act ‘as if’ we were the true authors of our actions in our daily lives. The way to reconcile these very different conclusions, it was argued, is to treat the idea of free will as a fiction allowing us to acknowledge the powerful experiential aspect without assuming that the experience of having a free will can confirm its metaphysical truth. This opens up for an educational path where the phenomenology of free will can be productively used as a valuable fiction, exploiting the imaginative appeal of the idea, while working towards a more metaphysically plausible understanding of ourselves and our place in nature.

In the Introduction, I described the aim of this book in terms of the importance of rendering the tacit assumption of free will visible so as to critically interrogate it and offer a different vantage point from where to approach autonomy in education; a vantage point less dependent upon what I have termed the folk psychology of free will (grounded in the intuitive appeal of libertarianism). This involved looking at some of the consequences of assuming that education and moral formation hinges on the capacity of free will and it involved investigating how a worldview conditioned by the assumption that natural causation constrains human action might be reconciled with a productive notion of human autonomy. A major consequence of assuming that moral formation hinges on the capacity of free will is – as argued in Chapter 4 – that moral education risks becoming synonymous with the training of young people in personal decision-making. If, as I have argued, the causal efficacy of human decisions is largely undercut by external and antecedent causes (beyond the agent’s control) this would seem to trouble such a narrow understanding of moral education. A wider understanding of moral education (*or* of a moral understanding of education) opens up for an educational endeavour to understand more about the causal nexus of our affects. It also allows for what Ravven (1990) calls the re-education of desire where a more realistic conception of the relation between reason and the emotions becomes the starting point for a cognitive conditioning aiming at the combating of harmful false beliefs.

Seeking to unsettle the role of false beliefs in education, I have argued that by exploiting the false belief in free will, endeavouring to turn it into a valuable fiction, the problem with an innate privation of knowledge (preventing us from solving the free will problem) can be tackled productively. This does not mean that determinism is taken to be a self-evident truth, but that it is held to be a more realistic metaphysical position than libertarianism and therefore more valid as a way of grounding human autonomy. Determinism is more realistic than libertarianism because determinism avoids the problem of origination, something that a libertarian account must confront and explain. In addition, I have argued that there are educational benefits to treating free will as a valuable fiction rather than a necessary illusion insofar as it takes seriously the phenomenology of free will without subscribing to an untenable metaphysical position where humans are, seemingly inexplicably, conceived as a dominion within a dominion.

A more realistic account of human agency, which accepts the metaphysical assumption that human actions are no less constrained by natural causation than other events, demands a radical reconfiguration of our understanding of autonomy. Here, Spinoza's naturalistic concept of autonomy – as the degree to which we adequately understand the true causes of our ideas and our actions – was argued to offer a viable alternative to notions of autonomy that openly or tacitly presuppose the ability to do otherwise. Spinoza's naturalistic conception of the will was argued to allow for a degree of autonomy while rejecting unfounded accounts of human exceptionalism, making it a potential starting point for educational development without grounding education in the folk psychology of free will. It is important to remind ourselves that the kind of autonomy Spinoza allows for differs substantially from what Nagel (1989) calls our ordinary conception of autonomy. Where our ordinary conception of autonomy relies on indeterminism and strong agential control, Spinoza's understanding of autonomy is thoroughly deterministic. We can, and should, come to understand ourselves better but we will never be the true authors of our actions in the sense of being *causa sui*. To be autonomous, for Spinoza, entails attaining a measure of self-understanding (which makes us gradually more causally responsible for our ideas), but it precludes self-causation and it precludes true moral responsibility. In short, Spinoza's notion of autonomy is thoroughly naturalistic and therefore incompatible with freedom of the will.

Besides having to explain how humans have the ability to act contrary to the rest of nature, it was argued that a libertarian understanding of free will is problematic insofar as it directs more attention to questions of blame and just deserts than to the educational cultivation of a virtuous character. Focusing on blame and just deserts was argued to be counterproductive for strengthening autonomy to the extent that it risks inadvertently encouraging rather than moderating moral anger. In sum, I have argued that by tacitly grounding education in the false belief in free will (without acknowledging the problematic basis for that belief) there is a danger of breeding moral anger as well as a danger of contributing to a confused understanding of how humans fit with the rest of nature by overestimating the human ability of decision-making. Both of these tendencies represent potential threats to, rather than assets for, the educational aims of autonomy and moral formation. Again, it is important to remind that both autonomy and moral formation are understood in strictly naturalistic terms here, lest we inadvertently reintroduce the same problem all over again. These concepts are retained because of their practicality and their pragmatic and social relevance, but they are divorced from unsustainable metaphysical presumptions in the same way that Spinoza retains the traditional moral concepts of Good and Evil but casts them in strictly naturalistic roles.

Understanding natural causation: an educational path to autonomy without free will

In this, the final chapter of the book, it is time to return to the question of autonomy as an educational aim and to investigate the tenability of asserting an

education for moral autonomy without relying on the unreflected folk psychology of free will, either as an assumed metaphysical truth or as a necessary illusion. Having outlined Spinoza's version of autonomy without free will in Chapter 2, this will serve as a useful starting point for an educational theory geared towards promoting students' autonomy within the limits of natural causation. Rather than directing our attention at the student's assumed ability to make uncaused personal choices, this educational theory focuses on increasing the student's gradual understanding of natural causation. It follows from this that the goal is not so much to instigate instrumental changes in behaviour as it is to help students perceive how and why things happen the way they do. The idea is that changes in behaviour will follow naturally from an increased understanding of natural causation. It is not that an increased understanding causes changes in one's behaviour but that changes in one's behaviour parallels an increased understanding.

To conclude this book, I aim to propose a few central features of the educational promotion of autonomy from the point of view of a Spinozistically conceived version of causal determinism. These are by no means exhaustive and they are not without limitations. The intention is not to outline a comprehensive educational programme capable of countering the full array of problems besetting educational accounts grounded in a libertarian understanding of the will. Instead, the intention is to propose some fruitful ways of thinking about education in a manner that does not require self-causation in the sense that many (if not most) available accounts of education for autonomy at bottom seem to do. I believe that this is called for precisely because philosophy of education suffers from a shortage of such attempts, be they Spinozistically conceived or otherwise. The shortcomings of a Spinozistic account of education for autonomy are fairly self-evident as they are the same shortcomings that haunt any attempt to reconcile autonomy with hard determinism writ large. It always begs the question of what kind of autonomy we are dealing with if everything is indeed causally determined. I will for obvious reasons not be able to settle this question here. What I aim to do, instead, is to – more modestly – propose an educational treatment of Spinoza's naturalistic version of autonomy so that the reader can judge whether this is any kind of autonomy worth striving for. If it is, then we may have a viable starting point for investigating a form of education for autonomy compatible with causal determinism, to be further developed, fleshed out and debated.

To be sure, there are other ways of taking on the moral dimensions of education without assuming an unconstrained free will. There have, for instance, been recent attempts to discuss moral education and moral luck that seek to avoid the Kantian demand on agential control (see for example Chinnery, 2015). This makes for an interesting alternative but it remains incompatible with a more thoroughly deterministic account of education simply because it allows for a form of contingency that hard determinism rejects. A Spinozistic contribution to the debate is interesting precisely because it sets out from a hard determinist position and formulates a version of autonomy that allows for luck no more than it allows for freedom of the will.

At the core of my proposed educational treatment of Spinoza's autonomy is the promotion of the student's endeavour to understand natural causation

adequately. The main reason for doing so is that from the point of view of causal determinism there is only one possible world, and if students get a good grasp of how that world functions, they will stand a better chance of being able to apply that knowledge in all other areas. Understanding natural causation, then, will allow students to understand human psychology, which, in turn, will allow them to understand questions concerning morality and so on. A prerequisite for the development of an adequate understanding of natural causation is the student's realisation of his or her cognitive limitations, a realisation that allows for the validity of approaching and understanding the world from many different perspectives. After all, a perspectival understanding of the world is all we can really hope for from the point of view of Spinoza's epistemology.

Besides, without first acknowledging the perspectival nature of knowledge, we risk ending up presenting the student with a version of natural causation that is too simplistic and too reductive, and this will only hamper the student's chances of understanding the world. Because natural causation is infinitely complex it is not a matter of handing over a ready-made map to the world. It is rather about outlining a method for understanding things in relation to other things, which means that an important part of coming to understand the world better is to acquire a reliable method for improving the understanding. A fundamental assumption of this method is that we can never really isolate things from one another. This entails that our understanding of things is always influenced by our perception of them. Because we are limited in our perception of things – we can, for example, only encompass a finite number of things at the same time – it is important that students come to see that this limitation is not a reflection of shortcomings in the natural world, but a reflection of their own cognitive limitations. It is also important to approach knowledge this way because it allows students to begin constructing their individual versions of a flourishing life in accordance with an adequate understanding of how they respond differently to different things in the world.

A central feature that follows from the students' realisation of their cognitive limitations is the promotion of self-understanding as a way of attaining a relatively adequate understanding of nature. This is based on Spinoza's assertion that we can come to know certain things more than we can other things (E2p16c2). In order to understand natural causation, I propose that students focus on studying what is most readily available to them, i.e. their own bodies in interaction with other bodies. This gives them an opportunity to observe natural causation up close where they can endeavour to see how the things that they experience mould them in different ways and how their ideas of things are bound up with their prior experiences. This makes for an important educational tool as it narrows down the things that may be understood adequately so that these things can be made the starting point for formulating an educated and personal understanding of well-being (as called for by White, 2002).

The next feature of a Spinozist version of education for autonomy involves combining the recognition of our innate privation of knowledge – resulting in the necessity of the belief in free will – with an understanding of the

inadequacy of these ideas from the point of view of natural causation. This way, students can come to terms with their experience of having a free will without assuming that this experience entails that free will is true in a metaphysical sense. Instead, studying the experience of having free will is a good way of approaching the psychological means by which we cope with a life in a deterministic universe. By separating metaphysical assumptions from psychological facts, students work on their ability to differentiate between how they experience the external world and the properties that they ascribe to the external world. This way they also see that moral values are always prejudiced insofar as they assume the perspective of someone trying to perfect him- or herself whereas the natural world is inherently amoral insofar as it does not strive in a teleological sense.

Another key aspect of a Spinozistic version of education for autonomy involves the student's acceptance of necessity as a path to autonomy. This is merely the natural outcome of the previous features outlined. It entails that once students can mediate between their psychological rendition of experiences and the metaphysical framework within which human psychology operates, they become relatively autonomous *vis-à-vis* external things. To become autonomous, in this sense, is to arrive at an understanding of the world that allows you to avoid unrealistic expectations of the world or of yourself. This, in turn, is a form of autonomy that is not threatened by the denial of free will but that presupposes education insofar as students need education in order to learn things about themselves and the world. Admittedly, it is a far cry from notions of autonomy hinged on the existence of free will (as the capacity to do otherwise), but it need not result in a standardised formula where one size fits all. Because we all respond differently to different things in the world, we all need to flesh out our own understanding of the things that benefit our striving for autonomy and to lay out a path to autonomy that fits us personally. This means that education needs to be protected from unjust interference from the irrational and passionate responses of external parties insofar as students must be guaranteed the relative freedom to pursue a good life befitting their particular constitution and level of understanding. Insofar as education concerns the protection of the common moral community from irrational responses inflamed by dangerous passions as well as the promotion of the understanding of the individual, we might speak of a dual purpose that appears to introduce a potential tension worth looking closer at.

Between facts and fictions: the dual purpose of education

Smilansky's understanding (outlined in the previous chapter) of the benefits of conceiving the idea of free will as an illusion to be indefinitely entertained for the purpose of keeping the moral community safe illustrates, with great clarity, an important educational dilemma that can be traced back to Plato's allegory of the Cave. As Nigel Tubbs succinctly puts it: 'If education is enlightening, unsettling and potentially destructive, is it right to teach for this? Is it right to teach for the shadows or to prepare the path out of the Cave?' (2005, p. 67). Rephrasing this

question in relation to the specific context of the free will problem, we might ask this: is it right to teach about the falsity of the belief in free will even if this understanding proves to be unsettling and potentially destructive? On Smilansky's view, the answer to this question appears straightforward enough: no, it is not right to do this as the repercussions for the stability of the moral community would – potentially – be far too grave.

Rather than settling for a categorical yes or no in reply to this question, however, I would like to qualify my answer by proposing a version somewhere in between. That is, yes, it is right insofar as the improvement of the understanding of the world (whereof our causal efficacy as human agents is an integral part) is – and *should* be – a central aim of education. In other words, to impose arbitrary limits on the improvement of the understanding would seem to be equivalent to celebrating ignorance as an aim of education, which appears paradoxical to say the least. At the same time, however, I would answer no, in that it is not right to tear down the fabric of what amounts to most people's moral world without first ensuring that their relative safety and well-being can be guaranteed. This appears to be a dilemma without any easy answers. Thankfully, however, I believe education can do both. That is, I believe education can help maintain the fundamental structure and fabric of the common moral community, even if this involves sometimes glossing over difficult metaphysical questions, *and* encourage the improvement of the understanding of the student without imposing arbitrary limitations on this striving. To see how this is possible, we should endeavour to develop this line of thinking some more.

Generally speaking, we might conceive two overarching (parallel) aims of education with regards to the free will problem specifically, and with regards to false beliefs more generally. On the one hand – more in line with Smilansky's views on free will as a necessary illusion – education could be legitimately claimed to aim to moderate the passive responses of the masses and, by doing so, protecting the stability of the common moral community from attacks grounded in a deterministic worldview. On the other hand – more in line with the understanding of free will as a valuable fiction – education could also, equally legitimately, aim to utilise the idea of free will as a means for promoting intellectual freedom. How, then, can these two very different aims be reconciled?

In order to see how these two seemingly very different – even contradictory – aims can be reconciled with one another it is useful to draw a parallel to Tubbs' understanding of the challenges and benefits of critical pedagogy. It is not that the educational theory I am constructing in this book is to be taken as a form of critical pedagogy necessarily, but that there is a parallel here that can help us outline a way of reconciling the dual purpose of education. Tubbs' writes:

Critical pedagogy, then, in many different guises, rests on the awareness that what counts in education in any given society is contingent upon and reproductive of the political relations that determine it. Teachers are inevitably caught up in this, and, at worst, act as agents for this reproduction. But awareness of this contingency, which we might call political awareness or

political consciousness, is the beginning of the possibility of transforming these relations.

(2005, pp. 92–93)

Whereas Tubbs' version of the critical teacher strives against becoming an agent of reproduction, I have been arguing that – to an extent – reproducing social norms and common moral standards is inevitably a part of what it is to be a teacher (at least if we consider education from the point of view of a public institution). This does not mean, however, that teachers should be unaware of the fact that they help reproduce existing political relations and moral standards. On the contrary, part of what I have set out to do is to illustrate the importance of understanding this aspect of education better, by focusing on uncovering and interrogating pervasive and taken for granted metaphysical presuppositions such as the human ability to do otherwise. This entails appreciating the importance of coming to perceive the limitations of our theoretical understanding of ourselves (and our social world) as well as acknowledging the importance of maintaining a common moral standard (and retaining traditional moral concepts) that can help protect us from one another.

In fact, the relative safety of our common moral community appears to be a precondition for our ability to cultivate our understanding of ourselves and the world in relative peace. This interdependency of the stability of the moral community and the striving for an increased understanding is key for seeing how two seemingly contradictory aims can be made to converge. On the one hand, then, the fiction of free will can be used in education to help moderate passivity and to curb the spreading of dangerous affective responses like anger and jealousy. On the other hand, as a valuable fiction (as opposed to as a necessary illusion) free will can also be exploited to support the striving for knowledge by offering a temporary conceptual ideal, that while being metaphysically flawed, can engage the imagination of those seeking to understand more about themselves and the world. In this way, the same tools used to govern and manipulate society by moderating social harms can be made to support intellectual freedom and human autonomy. In effect, understanding the dual purpose of education becomes part of gaining a more realistic understanding of what it is to be a social being striving for an improved understanding. Rather than attempting to resolve the tension arising from working with two seemingly conflicting aims, I am suggesting that by not underestimating the foundational nature of this paradox we will be better equipped to theorise education on the basis of what humans are and not on the basis of how we would want them to be.

Two parallel notions of education

In order to perceive the stakes more clearly, we might try a slightly different approach to the question of the dual purpose of education. Instead of perceiving education as a social arena where two competing aims are being negotiated, we might understand education in terms of two different yet complementary

practices. What we end up with is not so much a dual purpose of education as two different notions of education, each of which is guided by a specific aim. As indicated previously, these two notions of education are complementary and so the different aims are to be understood as coextensive rather than conflicting and competing. From the point of view of education as a political endeavour seeking to promote the relative well-being of the multitude, the practice of education concerns checking dangerous passions that threaten the stability of the common moral community. From the point of view of education as a personal transformation, the practice of education concerns maximising the power to persevere by promoting the improvement of the understanding. Let us look at how these two notions of education are related to one another by investigating what appears to be a tension in Spinoza's ethical theory.

Justin Steinberg (2014) has endeavoured to resolve the seeming paradox between Spinoza's meta-ethics – stipulating that we always strive to increase our power of acting, and that whatever enhances our power of acting is good and whatever inhibits it is evil (E4p8d) – and the practical utility of his dictates of reason – indicating that '[f]rom the guidance of reason we shall follow the greater of two goods or the lesser of two evils' (E4p65). A good place to begin perceiving this paradox is in E4p54s, where Spinoza explains why some things that *prima facie* inhibit our power of acting may turn out to be helpful insofar as they counter more dangerous passive affects. Spinoza writes:

Because men rarely live from the dictates of reason, these two affects, humility and repentance, and in addition, hope and fear, bring more advantage than disadvantage. So since men must sin, they ought rather to sin in that direction. If weak-minded men are all equally proud, ashamed of nothing, and afraid of nothing, how could they be united or restrained by any bonds?
(E4p54s)

Humility and repentance are passive affects that inhibit our power of acting insofar as they are grounded in false beliefs. Repentance, for example, is defined as 'a sadness accompanied by the idea of some deed we believe ourselves to have done from a free decision of the mind' (E3DOA 27). Because there are no free decisions of the mind, metaphysically speaking, to repent cannot be conceived as a rational response in itself. In a wider social context, however, these passive affects may help temper other, more dangerous, passive affects, and so they can be perceived as the lesser of two evils in a given situation. Spinoza continues by illustrating how fictions can be used to govern the multitude by way of the imagination:

The mob is terrifying, if unafraid. So it is no wonder that the prophets, who considered the common advantage, not that of the few, commended humility, repentance, and reverence so greatly. Really, those who are subject to these affects can be guided far more easily than others, so that in the end they may live from the guidance of reason, that is, may be free and enjoy the life of the blessed.

(E4p54s)

Because the overall stability of the moral community is a prerequisite for the peaceful and free exchange of ideas, and because most people are more susceptible to imaginative ideas that can help guide them practically than to philosophical propositions, it may be argued that public education needs to be organised so as to ensure that as many as possible opt for the lesser of two evils. Steinberg makes a distinction between the good *per se* (corresponding with what is truly rational) and the good *in situ* (corresponding with what is best – or least harmful – given the circumstances). While the good *per se* is available to us through philosophical reasoning, ‘[d]etermining what constitutes the good *in situ* requires input from the imagination, since one cannot have rational knowledge of concrete particulars’ (Steinberg, 2014, p. 183). Accordingly, Steinberg concludes that: ‘With the distinction between the good *in situ* and the good *per se* in mind, we can see that there is no paradox in claiming that it can sometimes be rational or good (*in situ*) to act contrary what is rational or good (*per se*)’ (pp. 183–184).

From the perspective of public education, then, educators must always have the well-being of the collective in mind and so they must tend to the different needs of different students in order to ensure that an ethical manner of living is upheld collectively. Practically speaking, Steinberg draws the following educational conclusion: ‘One should adopt teachings/commands and modes of presenting these teachings/commands that are suited to elicit optimal cognitive and affective responses relative to the circumstances and the casts of mind [*ingenia*] of the affected parties’ (p. 186). The aim of this educational practice is primarily to ensure the relative stability and peace of the moral community by being sensitive to the situation at hand. As hinted at previously, however, there is another notion of education that goes beyond (but is not inimical to) institutional schooling or public education and that is directed at the flourishing of the individual guided by reason. These practices are connected insofar as the governing of the multitude by way of their imagination is to be understood as a prerequisite for the empowerment of the individual guided by reason.

The notion of education that describes the process whereby an individual is striving for empowerment through the emendation of the intellect is not, however, insulated from the constraints of the imagination and the threat of harmful passive affects. Even people who are, relatively speaking, guided by reason are also determined to act by passive affects. The reason for this being – as we have already noted earlier – that nobody can acquire a perfect understanding of the affects. Spinoza is well aware of this. This is where valuable fictions can come to play a productive role for the conditioning of the imagination. Spinoza’s concrete advice for anyone seeking to become more autonomous *vis-à-vis* dangerous passions is to work hard on exploiting the imagination so as to make it serve intellectual ends:

The best thing, then, that we can do, so long as we do not have perfect knowledge of our affects, is to conceive a correct principle of living, *or* sure maxims of life, to commit them to memory, and to apply them constantly to the particular cases frequently encountered in life. In this way our imagination will be extensively affected by them, and we shall always have them ready.

(E5p10s)

This illustrates the parallelism between the two notions of education and their respective aims. It also illustrates the interdependency of the emendation of the intellect and the exploitation of the imagination. If we wish to ground education in a realistic conception of what it is to be human, we should remain attentive to both of these aims. To assume that the false belief in free will can simply be abolished from the domains of education is to underestimate the power of the emotions. To assume that the folk psychology of free will is an illusion that education must protect at any cost is to stifle the natural striving for autonomy and self-understanding. Balancing between maintaining the illusion of free will and exploiting the fiction of free will is a difficult task. As difficult as it is, it is an important task if we take seriously the importance of protecting our moral community without sacrificing the educational promotion of the understanding of ourselves and our place in the natural world.

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Index

- agent causation 99n5
agential control 29, 42n8, 122, 123
akrasia 91
anger 6, 102, 127; moral 103, 107, 111, 113, 115, 117n2, 122; Spinoza 103, 117n2
Aquinas 34, 66
Aristotle 10; autonomy 33, 36, 37; ethics 34, 66, 73, 82n5; highest good 63; moral autonomy 33–34; *Nicomachean Ethics* 65–66; praise and blame 73; virtue 34, 63, 66
Augustine 14, 16, 24n15, 82n7
autonomy 3, 7, 22; Aristotle 33, 36, 37; causal determinism 81, 85–99; Cuypers 31, 81n3; decision-making and moral responsibility 33–36; Dearden 30–31; departing from the ordinary 41; dispositional 31; Dworkin 28–29, 30, 32, 38; education 27–41, 109, 111, 117; through education 30–32; Frankfurt 29–30, 32, 38; freedom 28–30, 112; freedom and education 27–26; Gatens 97; Hand 31; Kant 33–34, 68, 89; manipulation and critical thinking 32–33; moral 33–34, 35, 36, 58; Morgan 31–32; Nagel 28, 30, 122; natural 89, 99n7, 123; natural intelligent 90; personal 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 38, 42n7, 68, 87, 112; Peters 32, 34–35, 68; self-determination and self-understanding 36–40; Spinoza 5, 6, 32, 35, 37, 39–41, 54, 56, 57–58, 81, 91–92, 97, 100n8, 110, 122, 123, 124, 125; Taylor 38, 42n7; valuable fiction 94–97; Waller 89–91; Winch 42n3; without free will 89–92, 120–139 (*see also* education for autonomy without free will)
Bennett, J. 19
blame and praise 66–67, 70, 80, 85; Aristotle 73; Peters 32; Spinoza 54–56, 76, 79
Bok, H. 23n11
Broad, C. D. 11, 23n9
Buddhism 65, 73, 82n4
capacity of free will 2, 4, 5, 9, 10, 22n4, 121
Carr, D.: education 62; Kant's influence 24n16; moral education 70; moral responsibility 70; moral wisdom of knowledge 66; teaching 115; virtuous agents 64; will 82n7
Cartesianism 59n5, 59n8, 59n9
Caruso, G. D. 38, 39, 50
causal determinism 5, 6, 14, 15, 17, 21, 23n14, 37, 38, 45–48, 58, 65, 72, 81, 114, 117, 123, 124; autonomy 81, 85–99; decision-making 91; false belief in freedom of the will 50–54, 71; hard determinism 85; moral responsibility 85–89; Spinoza 45–48, 50–54, 123
causa sui 9, 29, 35–36, 37, 45, 71, 109, 122
character education 5, 33, 34, 79, 81n1, 82n8; aims 63–65; challenges 65–73; Spinoza 73–75
charitability 2
charitable interpretations 2, 3
Chisholm, R. M. 11
Christianity 34, 66, 82n7
commonsense 85, 120; beliefs 7n1, 18, 70; morality 99n1
compatibilism 10, 12, 38, 71, 85, 86–87, 99n4, 105; natural 42n8; *see also* incompatibilism

- Confucianism: decision-making 65;
moral education 65, 73, 82n5; public
education 82n6; virtue 65, 73,
82n5
- Consequence Argument 13, 38
- contra-causal freedom 13
- critical rationality 33
- Curley, E. 7n4, 24n22, 60n13
- Cuypers, S. E. 32, 34, 35, 68, 69,
82n11; autonomy 31, 81n3
- Dearden, R. F. 30–31
- decision-making 15, 71, 122;
autonomy 33; autonomy and
moral responsibility 33–36; causal
determinism 91; Confucianism
65; efficacy 3; good 66; moral
development 37, 109; personal
5, 33, 34, 66, 73, 109
- Deleuze, G. 76
- Della Rocca, M. 24n21, 47–48,
50, 59n9
- Descartes, R. 19, 24n20
- determinism 10, 11, 12, 13, 113, 121;
causal 5, 6, 14, 15, 17, 21, 23n14,
37, 38, 45–48, 50–54, 58, 65, 72,
81, 85–99, 114, 117, 123, 124
(*see also* causal determinism);
degrees 105; hard 42n9, 85, 87,
88, 105, 123; Honderich 118n8;
Pereboom 42n9, 87; Peters 106;
soft 85, 86; Spinoza 5, 20, 45–48,
50, 74, 81, 123; Strawson 24n19,
39, 71, 118n10, 180n11; *see also*
indeterminism
- Dworkin, G. 28–29, 32, 38
- education for autonomy without free
will 120–130; dual purpose of
education 125–127; parallel
notions 127–130; understanding
natural causation 122–125
- emendation of the intellect 129, 130
- ethics 63; Aristotle 34, 66, 73, 82n5;
Buddhism 65, 73; Confucianism
65, 73, 82n5; Deleuze 76; Kant
24n16, 66; Socratic 82n5; Spinoza
20, 48, 55, 76, 80, 95, 128; *see
also* Spinoza, B.: ethical theory;
Spinoza, B.: *Ethics*
- eudaimonia* 63–64, 73–74, 108
- event-causation 99n5
- external standpoint 6, 21, 57, 60n15,
91, 100n8, 106
- false beliefs 5, 6, 109, 110, 118n10,
120, 122, 126, 128, 130; freedom
of the will 50–54, 71; Pereboom
102; Ravven 121; Smilansky 104,
115; Spinoza 24n19, 55–56, 58,
60n11, 81, 93, 106; Spinoza, causal
determinism and false belief in
freedom of will 50–54; Spinoza, false
belief to valuable fiction 7n3, 99,
102–104; Steinberg 94–95; Strawson
24n19, 98; valuable fiction 94–95,
102–104, 111, 112, 114, 115,
116–117; Waller 90
- first mover 11
- folk psychology of free will 6, 38, 39,
41, 50, 54, 65, 88, 117, 120, 121,
122, 123, 130
- fragmentation 3, 7n3
- Frankfurt, H. G. 12–13, 22n3, 23n12,
34, 42n2, 42n6; autonomy 29–30,
32, 38
- freedom: autonomy 28–30; contra-
causal 13; education 27–28;
false belief in freedom of the will
50–54, 71; gradual freedom from
external causes 5, 19, 56–58; Kant's
transcendental freedom 14–15,
24n17, 33–34, 67; noumenal 42n5;
positive 89; Spinoza's counterintuitive
conception of necessitated freedom
18–22; Spinoza's gradual freedom
from external causes 5, 19, 56–58;
Spinoza's necessitated freedom
18–22; teaching 41n1; transcendental
14–15, 24n17, 33–34, 42n5, 67
- free man 68, 75, 96
- free will as a valuable fiction in
education 102–117; complexity of
natural causation and educational
dream of unpredictability 113–117;
false belief to valuable fiction
102–104; fictions and illusions
104–107; illustrative examples
111–113; reason and emotions
107–111
- free will problem 9–22; autonomy
without 89–92; beyond standard
positions 18–22; introduction 10;
problem with standard positions
16–17; Spinoza's counterintuitive
conception of necessitated freedom
18–22; standard position 10–16;
unmoved mover 9–10, 39; valuable
fiction 92–94

- Gatens, M. 109, 110; autonomy 97; philosophical exemplar 96
 Giesinger, J. 67, 68
 God 66; Chisholm 10; Deleuze 76; Descartes 24n20; Kane 86; Spinoza 5, 19, 45–46, 51, 52, 56, 57, 59n3, 59n10, 75, 76, 95, 106, 117n1; Tóth 52
 good and evil 59n1, 75, 76, 97, 122
 Gordon, D. 72
 gradual freedom from external causes 5, 19, 56–58
- Hand, M. 31, 63, 82n17
 Higgins, C. 82n8
 highest good: Aristotle 63; Spinoza 107, 118n6
 Hobbes, T., *Leviathan* 12
 Honderich, T. 11, 12, 16, 22n1, 118n8
 Hübner, K. 19
 Hume, D. 23n5, 115; *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* 12
- illusion 6, 57, 79, 82n13, 109, 113, 114, 121, 123, 127, 130; fictions 104–107; Smilansky 104–105, 115, 117n3, 125–126
 illusion of free will 57, 105, 106, 130
 imitation of affects 53, 59n7, 108
 incompatibilism 10, 13, 16, 42n9, 71
 indeterminism 11, 23n14, 48, 85, 86, 89, 122
- James, W. 14
 Jarrett, C. 76
 jealousy 6, 108, 127
 joy 48, 49, 50, 74, 79, 80, 103, 112
- Kane, R. 23n14, 86; *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* 7n8
 Kant, I.: agential control 123; autonomy 33–34, 68, 89; ethics 24n16, 66; free will 14–15, 65; moral autonomy 33–34, 68; noumenal self 14, 36–37, 42n4; principles 66, 71; transcendental freedom 14–15, 24n17, 33–34, 67; virtue 66, 71; will 73
- laws of nature 11–12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 23n7, 91, 92
 LeBuffe, M. 49–50, 55, 107–108
 libertarianism 13–14, 15, 16, 23n12, 23n13, 24n15, 24n17, 30, 38, 39, 42n8, 54, 85, 86, 87, 89, 90, 91, 99n1, 106, 110, 111, 116, 117, 118n8, 120, 121, 122, 123; event-causal 99n5
 Lloyd, G. 109, 110
- Manekin, C. H. 24n18, 59n2, 59n4
 Marshall, E. 47
 Melamed, Y. Y. 2, 3, 18, 46, 53–54
 metaphysical assumptions 1, 16–17, 58, 122, 125
 moral autonomy 33–34, 35, 36, 123
 moral development, decision-making 37, 109
 moral education and moral responsibility 62–81; Carr 70; character education aims 63–65; character education challenges 65–73; character education per Spinoza 73–75; education and moral formation 62–63; free will problem and question of moral responsibility 65–73; model of moral education or a moral model of education 78–81; moral knowledge per Spinoza 75–77; Peters 68, 69, 71–72, 73; self-preservation 96, 98, 108, 109, 110; self-preservation per Spinoza 6, 19, 58, 74–75, 77–78, 79, 92, 97, 102, 105, 106; virtue cultivation 63–65
 moral knowledge, Spinoza 75–77, 80
 moral person 2
 moral responsibility and moral education free will problem 62–81; Carr 70; character education aims 63–65; character education challenges 65–73; character education per Spinoza 73–75; education and moral formation 62–63; free will problem and question of moral responsibility 65–73; model of moral education or a moral model of education 78–81; moral knowledge per Spinoza 75–77; Peters 68, 69, 71–72, 73; self-preservation 96, 98, 108, 109, 110; self-preservation per Spinoza 6, 19, 58, 74–75, 77–78, 79, 92, 97, 102, 105, 106; virtue cultivation 63–65
 Morgan, J. 31–32

- Nagel, T. 21, 22, 38, 57; autonomy 28, 30, 122
 natural authenticity 99n7
 natural compatibilism 42n8
 natural intelligent autonomy 90
 Nature 97; Spinoza 18–19, 45, 51, 56, 57, 75, 106
 nature, laws of 11–12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 18, 23n7, 91, 92
 necessitarianism 52, 59n4, 73, 93
 noumenal: freedom 42n5; realm 14; self 34, 37, 42n4, 68
- open future 92, 94
 optimistic nutritionist 50, 55, 80, 107
 Ostens, J. 107
- Pai, Y. 82n13
 panpsychism 24n21
 Peirce, C. S. 14
 Pereboom, D. 11, 22, 23n13, 24n23, 41; autonomy 89; capacity for deliberating 92; criminal imprisonment 24n25; determinism 42n9, 87; false belief 102; hard determinism/incompatibilism 42n9, 85, 87, 88, 99n6; *Living Without Free Will* 23n14; moral responsibility and choice-making 41
 Peters, R. S. 35; autonomy 32, 34–35, 68; blame and praise 32; determinism 106; *Moral Development and Moral Education* 32; moral education 68, 69, 71–72; moral responsibility 73; ‘universal get-out’ 71–72
 philosophical exemplar 96
 Plato 2, 14; Cave 27, 125; *thumos* 82n7
 positive freedom 89
 praise and blame 66–67, 70, 80, 85; Aristotle 73; Peters 32; Spinoza 54–56, 76, 79
 prejudices 4, 57, 58, 76, 102, 125; deep-seated 56; harmful 102; intolerance 115; superstition 3
 principle of alternate possibilities 13, 23n12
 Principle of Sufficient Reason 47–48
- Ravven, H. M. 34, 37, 66; false belief 121; *The Self Beyond Itself* 78–79
 reason and emotions 107–111
 Reflective-Endorsement view 87
 Rousseau, J.-J., *Émile* 2, 27
- sadness 48, 50, 103, 128
 Schuller, G. H. 20
 self-determination 30, 69; Aristotle 36; autonomy 36; Hand 31; Spinoza 19, 20, 28, 37, 39, 40, 45–58, 59n1
 self-harm 54, 55
 self-preservation 96, 98, 108, 109, 110; Spinoza 6, 19, 58, 74–75, 77–78, 79, 92, 97, 102, 105, 106
 self-understanding 5, 28, 32, 36, 37, 40, 41, 57, 58, 114, 118n10, 122, 124, 130
 Skinner, B. F. 11
 Smilansky, S. 99n3, 106; false belief 104, 115; *Free Will and Illusion* 42n8; illusion 104–105, 115, 117n3, 125–126
 social malaise 72
 soft determinism 85, 86
 Spinoza, B.: anger 103, 117n2; autonomy 5, 6, 32, 35, 37, 39–41, 54, 56, 57–58, 81, 91–92, 97, 100n8, 110, 122, 123, 124, 125; building a house example 97; causal determinism 45–48, 123; causal determinism and false belief in freedom of will 50–54; character education 73–75; determinism 5, 20, 50, 74, 81; emendation of the intellect 129, 130; ethical striving for knowledge 5, 45, 48–50, 74; ethical theory 18, 20, 45, 58, 73, 74, 76, 80, 82n17, 106, 128; ethics 20, 48, 55, 76, 80, 95, 128; *Ethics* 7n4, 18, 20, 59n6, 59n8, 76, 95, 97, 107, 118n7; false belief 24n19, 55–56, 58, 60n11, 81, 93, 106; false belief to valuable fiction 102–104; free man 75, 96; free will 4, 5, 19, 45–46, 51, 52, 56, 57, 59n3, 59n10, 75, 76, 95, 106, 117n1; gradual freedom from external causes 5, 19, 56–58; highest good 107, 118n6; human nature 3–4; *Metaphysical Thoughts* 21, 24n24; moral knowledge 75–77, 80; moral responsibility 5; Nature 18–19, 45, 51, 56, 57, 75, 106; necessitated freedom 18–22; *Political Treatise* 3, 55, 116; praise and blame 54–56, 76, 79; preconceptions 3; self-determination 19, 20, 28, 37, 39, 40, 45–58, 59n1; self-preservation 6, 19, 58, 74–75, 77–78, 79, 92, 97,

- 102, 105, 106; *Theological-Political Treatise (TTP)* 92, 94, 95, 117n1; *Treatise on the Emendation of the Intellect* 93; valuable fiction 24n19, 58, 81, 100n9, 102–104; virtue 47, 49, 55, 73–75, 79, 107, 116
- Steinberg, J. 77, 92, 128, 129; false belief 94–95
- Stoic 59n8, 92, 109
- Stone, C. M. 31
- Strawson, G. 11, 116; Basic Argument 35–36, 69, 71; compatibilism 39, 71; determinism 39, 71, 118n10, 118n11; difficult choices 99n2; freedom 60n11; libertarianism 23n14; ‘local erosions’ 112; moral responsibility 70; natural compatibilism 42n8
- Strawson, P. F.: determinism 24n19; false belief 24n19, 98; ‘Freedom and Resentment’ 17; inter-personal attitudes 58
- Strike, K. A. 81n2
- Subjectivist theory 60n12
- superstition 3, 40, 20, 74, 95, 102
- Taylor, R. M. 38, 42n7
- teaching and freedom 41n1
- Tóth, O. I. 5, 52
- transcendental freedom 14–15, 24n17, 33–34, 42n5, 67
- Tubbs, N. 125, 126–127; *Philosophy of the Teacher* 41n1
- unmoved mover 9–10, 39
- unwilling addict 29
- Vaihinger, H. 100n9, 117n3
- valuable fiction 118n11; autonomy 94–97; complexity of natural causation and educational dream of unpredictability 113–117; education 98–99; false belief to valuable fiction 102–104; fictions and illusions 104–107; free will 6–7, 54, 56, 88, 92–94, 102–117, 121, 126, 127; illustrative examples 111–113; reason and emotions 107–111; Spinoza 24n19, 58, 81, 100n9, 102–104
- Van Inwagen, P. 10, 16, 22n2, 23n7, 85; Consequence Argument 13, 38
- virtue 1, 11, 50, 71; Aristotle 34, 63, 66; Buddhism 73, 82n4; character 63; Confucianism 65, 73, 82n5; cultivation 63–65; Hume 115; Kant 66, 71; Spinoza 47, 49, 55, 73–75, 79, 107, 116
- Waller, B. N. 11, 89–91, 99n7; false belief 90
- White, J. 37; *Education and the Good Life* 82n10
- Whitehead, A. N., *The Aims of Education and Other Essays* 27
- Wiggins, D. 15
- Winch, C. 7n1, 7n2, 42n3, 120; *Education, Autonomy and Critical Thinking* 32
- Wood, A. W. 34